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TAJIKISTAN: Why are around 93 Muslims being detained?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Some 93 followers of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement are being detained in Tajikistan, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Officials have claimed to Forum 18 that the number is "much smaller than 93", but have refused to state who is being held or why they are being held. Officials claimed to Forum 18 the movement was banned in Tajikistan in 2006, but a Supreme Court official and civil society sources have told Forum 18 that they were unaware of the ban. An independent human rights defender who is familiar with the group's followers in Tajikistan described it to Forum 18 as "peaceful" and said "they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements (...). This is exactly what Tajikistan needs." One Jamaat Tabligh follower questioned why, if the authorities think the group is harmful, its followers were able to preach openly. He told Forum 18 that "there were no attempts to stop our activity until now. We gathered in various mosques once a week with the invitation and permission of the mosques' imams."

At least 93 Jamaat Tabligh followers in Tajikistan have been held in police detention centres since 14 April, Forum 18 News Service has been told by a Jamaat Tabligh follower, who wanted to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals. The 93 are held in the capital Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob. Officials have refused to give the names or the exact number of those arrested. Jamaat Tabligh, whose name means the Society of Preachers, is an Islamic movement promoting Muslim values.

The authorities are refusing to say exactly why the 93 have been arrested. Humayro Mirova, the Interior Ministry's Press Officer could not tell Forum 18 on 13 May under which law the Jamaat Tabligh followers were arrested, but stated that they would face criminal charges for extremism. Muhammedjon Khayrulloev, an official of the General Prosecutor's Office, told Forum 18 on 12 May that they would charge the arrested people with "engaging in illegal religious activity."

Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) - the only legal religious party in Central Asia - suggested that "the government may have felt threatened" by the movement's influence. "Because their [Jamaat Tabligh's] numbers grew in thousands, the government decided to put a stop to the movement now," he told Forum 18 on 14 May from Dushanbe.

The arrests

Trouble began for Jamaat Tabligh followers on 14 April, when 113 people were arrested while listening to a sermon preached by a Jamaat Tabligh preacher in Dushanbe's Umari Farrukh Mosque. "The Deputy Police Chief of Dushanbe's Firdavsi District entered the mosque during the sermon, and told people in the mosque not to panic, but to quietly get into buses waiting outside for them," a Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18 on 12 May. "From there the people were taken to the Firdavsi Police Station to be questioned, and later to a police detention centre."

Shortly after the raid on the mosque in Dushanbe, National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, together with ordinary police began arresting people in Qurghonteppa and Kulob, in south-west Tajikistan. "Some were arrested in their homes, others at their work places and still others on the street," the Jamaat Tabligh follower said. "It took the NSC secret police about 15 days to arrest people in those two cities, the last one being arrested at the beginning of May."

How many are still detained?

Interior Ministry officials - including Interior Minister Abdurahim Kahhorov at a 22 April press conference - have admitted to only four arrests of Jamaat Tabligh followers. "Only four persons are being held in the Ministry's detention centre," Mirova of the Interior Ministry insisted to Forum 18 on 13 May. However, she did not disclose their names. "At first more people were arrested," she claimed without specifying when. "All but four were later released." Mirova refused to give the number of the released people.

Equally, Khayrulloev of the General Prosecutor's Office would not give the exact number of arrests. He told Forum 18 that it was "much smaller than 93."

But other sources have given much higher figures. Jamaat Tabligh followers state that 34 of their colleagues have been held since 14 April in Dushanbe, 47 are said to be held in Qurghonteppa and 12 in Kulob. This would bring the total number of detainees to 93. "All of them are being interrogated by police and NSC secret police investigators," Forum 18 was told.

The Jamaat Tabligh follower identified some of those arrested as: Khushbakht Davletov, Saidmashrab, Bilol, Safarali, Bakhrom, Nasriddin (last names unknown), who are held in Dushanbe; Nosir, Ikbolsho, Amirali, Talabsho, Churakhon (last names unknown) being held in Qurghonteppa; and Nurullo Sadriddin being held in Kulob.

Also contesting official claims was Saifullozoda of the IRP. He told Forum 18 that "up to twenty" Muslims might be charged for allegedly inciting people to religious intolerance in an organised fashion. "I heard that at first it was four persons but later, as the number of people arrested across Tajikistan grew, up to 20 people are said to face criminal charges," he told Forum 18.

Is Jamaat Tabligh banned?

Tajik authorities claim that Jamaat Tabligh was banned in 2006. However, other Tajik sources have told Forum 18 that - if the movement was banned in 2006 - the ban was not made public.

When Tajikistan banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009, that ban was widely known and condemned at the time of the ban (see F18News 23 January 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243>).

Asked for the reason for the arrests, Khayrulloev of the General Prosecutors Office claimed that the Jamaat Tabligh movement was banned by the Supreme Court on 30 March 2006. "The movement is on Tajikistan's official list of banned terrorist and extremist organisations, which includes Al-Qaeda," he told Forum 18.

Echoing Khayrulloev was Idibek Ziyoyev, Head of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department. He said his Department in 2004 gave an unofficial warning to the public that the Jamaat Tabligh was an extremist movement. "It was in 2006 that the official warning came with the Supreme Court decision," he told Forum 18 on 7 May. When asked why Jamaat Tabligh followers were allowed to preach in the mosques regularly after the alleged ban, Ziyoyev claimed that they did it "without permission".

Asked why no court cases had been brought against the Jamaat Tabligh followers since the claimed ban, both Ziyoyev and Khayrulloev referred Forum 18 to the NSC secret police. "Please ask the NSC, which is leading the investigation," Khayrulloev said. However, the NSC secret police told Forum 18 on 13 May that they were "in no way involved in the arrests or interrogation of Jamaat Tabligh."

Supreme Court official denies knowledge of claimed ban

An official of the Supreme Court Chancellery (who would not give his name) said he knew nothing about a ban on Jamaat Tabligh. "If there was a decision about it in 2006, it would probably be in the archives," he told Forum 18 on 12 May. He referred Forum 18 to Solehjon Zavkiyev, Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. "He must know about the case, talk to him," he said.

Zavkiyev said he knew nothing about the ban and referred Forum 18 on 12 May to Farrukh Malakhov, the Supreme Court's Press Officer. Forum 18 unsuccessfully tried to reach Malakhov between 12 and 14 May. All calls went unanswered.

Civil society sources doubt ban's existence

A Jamaat Tabligh follower complained to Forum 18 that neither he or nor anyone else from the movement knew of the Supreme Court ban. "Since 2004 more than 200 Muslims have been detained by the police and NSC secret police at various times, questioned about Jamaat Tabligh religious activity and teachings, and then released," he said. "None of them were told of the existence of a ban."

A well-informed independent human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous, agreed. "When my organisation asked the Interior Ministry the reasons for the arrests, they told us that Jamaat Tabligh was banned," he told Forum 18 on 14 May from Dushanbe. "However they didn't produce any proof of the ban." He told Forum that he had "never heard" of the ban before.

Sayfullozoda of the IRP vaguely remembered that "a couple of years ago there was a notice in the press that Jamaat Tabligh movement along with IMU and some other Islamic movements" was banned in Tajikistan. "No one took any seriously notice of this, as people in Tajikistan were not even familiar with Jamaat Tabligh," he commented. "I can say that Jamaat Tabligh as a movement didn't even exist in Tajikistan then." Sayfullozoda then suggested that this could be the reason why the authorities "until now tolerated individual Jamaat Tabligh members."

CSTO ban

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which brings together seven of the former Soviet republics including Tajikistan, added Tabligh Jamaat and Salafism to its list of "extremist" organisations this year, press reports say. The CSTO list was first drawn up in November 2004 and included 22 organisations, but seven more were added this year.

What did the Jamaat Tabligh followers do?

It is unclear what actions by Jamaat Tabligh followers - or anyone else - triggered the arrests. Officials have repeatedly refused to name any specific incidents which caused the arrests. A Religious Affairs Department official who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 13 May that he could not say what exactly was wrong in the actions of Jamaat Tabligh followers. He said that neither Ziyoyev nor anyone else was available to answer the question.

Attempts to persuade the General Prosecutor's Office or the Interior Ministry to comment were unsuccessful on 13 and 14 May. All calls went unanswered.

None of the arrested Muslims have in the past been criminally or administratively punished, the Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18. He stated that the names of their preachers were "well known" to the authorities. "They freely preached in the mosques, and there were no attempts to stop our activity until now," he pointed out. "We gathered in various mosques once a week with the invitation and permission of the mosques' imams."

The Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18 that among those arrested "only ten to twelve people" had studied abroad in Iran, Syria, and India, while some others were educated in Tajikistan.

The human rights defender had heard Interior Ministry officials claiming that they had found Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan leaflets on Jamaat Tabligh followers arrested in the mosque in Dushanbe. "I personally don't believe the claims, since I know that Jamaat Tabligh is a moderate Islamic movement," he emphasised. Describing the movement as "peaceful," he told Forum 18 that he had personally met and talked to their representatives.

"Jamaat Tabligh followers explain to other Muslims the meaning of Sharia, and call on them to respect it. They do not call Muslims to violence or force their own viewpoint on others," he stated. "On the contrary, they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. This is exactly what Tajikistan needs." (For an outline of Hizb-ut-Tahrir's views, see F18News 29 October 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170>.)

Sayfullozoda of the IRP said Jamaat Tabligh in Tajikistan had "never got involved in politics, unlike some other Islamic movements. Jamaat Tabligh purely stuck to explaining the Koran and the five pillars of Islam." He said he did not know everybody within the movement, but "on the whole the movement in Tajikistan has been peaceful."

Salafi ban

Ziyoyev of the Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 that the actions against followers of Jamaat Tabligh had no connection with the January 2009 ban on the Salafi school of Islamic thought (see F18News 23 January 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243>). "No Salafis have been arrested or brought before the courts since the ban," he claimed.

Saifullozoda of the IRP agreed with Ziyoyev's claim, stating that he also had not heard of any action being taken against Salafis since the ban.

Will or won't the Religion Law be changed?

Tajikistan's government is making contradictory statements about whether or not the new and restrictive Religion law will be changed, Forum 18 has noted. President Emomali Rahmon has stated that the Law "will not be changed" as it is "well-defined and clear". However, Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Ministry of Culture, has told Forum 18 that the Law is "not a dogma" and may change. "We are at the moment studying the law, and collecting recommendations on possible changes and corrections," he stated. Protests against the Law have continued within Tajikistan (see F18News 8 May 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1292>). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815>.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>>.

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