



This article was published by F18News on: 26 June 2007

UZBEKISTAN: Crackdown on Protestants continues

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

In the latest deportation for religious activity known to Forum 18 News Service, a Tajik Pentecostal who has lived in Uzbekistan for more than 10 years has been deported to Tajikistan. Sayora (who preferred that her last name not be published) was held in jail for 22 days before deportation. Other church members arrested and held by the NSS secret police in the raid include a man who was intimidated by officials and neighbours into moving out of his local mahalla (urban district). Five church members were fined and three were jailed for five days after trial. A registered Full Gospel congregation near Tashkent has failed to persuade the authorities to hold Anti-Terrorist police to account for violent threats made during a raid on the church. Police claimed the church was "preparing terrorists." After another police raid in north-west Uzbekistan, where all non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity is a criminal offence, a Protestant has been sentenced for "illegally teaching religion." The trial of other local Protestants is continuing. Officials have refused to discuss these cases with Forum 18.

A Tajik citizen who has lived in Uzbekistan for more than 10 years was deported back to Tajikistan on about 19 June, local Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Members of her Pentecostal church in the capital Tashkent insist that Sayora (who preferred that her last name not be published) was deported in retaliation for her involvement in the congregation. She was held in jail for 22 days, after being among a group of Pentecostals arrested after meeting in a church member's home. Another of those arrested, a man named Zainiddin (who also preferred that his last name not be published), was held for five days, then threatened and intimidated by neighbours and the police into moving out of his local mahalla (urban district).

Protestants in Uzbekistan pointed out to Forum 18 that Zainiddin's case is the second in the past few months where a Protestant family has been forced to leave their home after threats, intimidation and pressure. A pastor's daughter was kidnapped in April before being freed in a traumatised state, while the family was subjected to threats, beatings, allegedly inspired by the mullahs at the local mosque. The family was apparently targeted because the pastor is a convert to Christianity who actively shares his faith (see F18News 20 April 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=945>).

Sayora's deportation is the latest in a series of deportations of foreign citizens involved in religious activity. The victims thus far have been Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants, a typical example being Ivan Bychkov, a Russian Baptist deported on 11 August 2006 (see F18News 21 August 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833>).

No official at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent was prepared even to talk to Forum 18. Reached on 26 June, an official who would not give his name said the chairman Artyk Yusupov was not in the office and put the phone down. The phone then went unanswered when Forum 18 called back, as did the phones of other Committee officials.

Sayora and Zainiddin were among 13 members of a Pentecostal congregation in Tashkent held when visiting an elderly church member in her home in the city's Mirzo-Ulugbek district in late May. The National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided the home, filmed those present, threatened them and took them to the local police station for interrogation. Eight church members were subsequently tried at Mirzo-Ulugbek District Criminal Court under the Code of Administrative Offences. Three men were given sentences of five days' administrative arrest at the prison on Panelnaya Street, while five more were each fined 62,100 Sums (296 Norwegian Kroner, 37 Euros or 49 US Dollars).

Although the three men were freed after five days, Sayora was kept in prison for 22 days until her deportation. She had lived in Uzbekistan for more than a decade and had tried in vain to get Uzbek citizenship. "I believe she was deported because she is a Christian," one of her friends told Forum 18.

Another of those detained when police raided the private home was Zainiddin, who is in his fifties. He was freed after five days but was then subjected to huge pressure to leave his urban district. "Zainiddin was threatened and pressured in prison to renounce his faith," one colleague told Forum 18 from Tashkent. "While he was in prison, officials in uniform visited his mahalla [urban district] and informed the neighbours. Then when he came out of prison he met a storm of dissatisfaction and hostility from neighbours, his parents and the local policeman. The local policeman ordered him to clear out of the mahalla by 1 July." Religious communities often face repression organised at the mahalla level (see F18News 27 March 2007

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936>).

As well as facing pressure from officials, including the NSS secret police, and his family, Zainiddin also faced threats from local residents his colleague described as "Muslim fanatics". Zainiddin was warned not to attend church, otherwise his and his family's throats would be cut. After being seen attending church again despite the warnings, Zainiddin was again beaten. "His wife is bearing up, but she often breaks down in tears." The youngest of their three children still lives with them. Later in June, the family was forced to move to another part of Tashkent.

Meanwhile, members of the registered Full Gospel congregation in Yangiyul, near Tashkent, have failed to persuade the Prosecutor's Office to open a criminal investigation into the actions of police officers who raided their Sunday worship service on 13 May, Protestant sources told Forum 18. The Yangiyul town Prosecutor, Abdugany Naibiev, rejected the attempt, writing on 13 June that that there was, as he put it, "the absence in the actions of the police representatives of the substance of a crime".

Church members complain that the raid, conducted by six police officers and led by S. Norov of the Anti-Terrorist Department, was "illegal". They say they were filmed without their permission and that the police officers swore at them and threatened them with violence. They add that the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Bely, was threatened with criminal charges as, the police claimed, the church was involved in "preparing terrorists". In the wake of the raid, church members made written complaints to various government agencies.

An official of the Yangiyul Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 26 June that Naibiev was no longer in the office, but said Furhat Azhizov had been handling the case. However, Azhizov's assistant, who would not give his name, said he had no information. "I know there was a complaint, but I don't have the details," he told Forum 18. Asked why a group of religious believers was raided during a service, the assistant declined to respond. "I don't have the right to give information by telephone."

Protestants also remain under pressure in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, where all non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity is banned (see eg. F18News 10 May 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=953>). The trial began on 11 June in Nukus, the region's capital, of Zlikha Ordobayeva, Protestant sources have told Forum 18. She was accused of "illegally teaching religion" after police raided a gathering of Protestants at a private home in Nukus at Easter. (The same charge was earlier made against Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev - see F18News 20 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977>) The prosecutor has demanded a fine of 50,000 Sums (235 Norwegian Kroner, 29 Euros or 40 US Dollars).

As Ordobayeva was in bed and too ill to come to court, the judges decided to hold the hearing in her home. Four court officials arrived to hold the first hearing. "She was on trial for teaching religion although she is illiterate," one source told Forum 18. "She can hardly string more than a few words together. The judge could see that but stated that he would follow the decision the Prosecutor's Office has already taken. The local policeman testified that she was teaching when they raided the gathering."

On 15 June the court gave Ordobayeva an official verbal warning. The trials of a number of other local Protestants held after the same raid are due to continue.

Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses have been the religious communities that have faced the brunt of official pressure so far in 2007. Their congregations across Uzbekistan have been raided, and individual believers have been beaten, threatened, fined and imprisoned (see F18News 20 April 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=945>).

The most severe sentences so far imposed in 2007 have been: four years in a labour camp for Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (see F18News 12 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973>); two years in a labour camp for Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov; two years corrective labour for Jehovah's Witness Dilafuz Arziyeva; and one year corrective labour, with a fine of 20 per cent of his salary, for Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev (see F18News 20 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977> for all three of these last cases). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338>.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777>.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>>.

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 Uzbekistan is available at
<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>>

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