



This article was published by F18News on: 12 April 2013

UZBEKISTAN: "All believers are backward-looking fanatics who drag society down"

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

A small Baptist church in Mubarek in south-eastern Uzbekistan which has endured more than a decade of official harassment was again raided during Sunday morning worship on 24 March, church members complained to Forum 18 News Service. The secret police officer who led the raid told the Baptists that "all believers are backward-looking fanatics who drag society down". Officers filmed those praying, took their names and without a warrant searched the house where the church meets. They seized personal notes and family photos, as well as all the money from the church's cash-box. "I don't know which agencies participated, but it definitely was not from our division," Major Rajab Shavkatov, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division of Mubarek Police, told Forum 18. The raid came two months after bailiffs seized a washing machine and other household items to cover unpaid fines handed down on church members in 2012.

Uzbekistan's authorities continue to attack unregistered worship and punish participants, as well as punishing individual believers for discussing their faith with others, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided a small unregistered Baptist community's Sunday worship service in south-eastern Kashkadarya Region. They disrupted the service and took down the name of each worshipper, a church member complained to Forum 18. They also without a warrant searched the private home where the worship was held, confiscating church members' personal notes, postcards and family photos of the residents in the home, and seized all the money from the church's cash-box.

The NSS secret police officer who led the raid told the Baptists that "all believers are backward-looking fanatics who drag society down", a church member complained to Forum 18. Church members are likely to face administrative fines. Police and NSS secret police declined to make any comments on the raid or possible punishments.

This is the latest of many raids over more than a decade on Mubarek's Council of Churches Baptist community, a congregation that refuses to seek the compulsory state registration. Church members have repeatedly been detained and questioned by Police and later fined, while Christian books and other materials have been confiscated. When later the fines were not paid, authorities seized church members' household items - such as a washing machine - as punishment, as happened again in January (see below).

Punished also in Kokand in the eastern Fergana Region was Rasulon Ahmedov, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church, for discussing his Christian beliefs with his neighbour. A court fined him 20 times the minimum monthly wage for alleged missionary activity. Missionary activity is banned by the Religion Law.

And four Protestants in Tashkent Region lost their appeal against large fines handed down in December 2012 to punish them for participating in a religious meeting (see below).

Raids on religious worship and fines to punish participants come as known religious believers also face frequent raids on their private homes, often without a warrant. Religious literature and other property is seized and fines described as "unbelievably high" are handed down (see F18News 11 April 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1823>).

Mubarek raid

Eight officials, one in Police uniform and seven others in plain clothes, "without warning broke into" the private home of local Baptist Vladimir Khanyukov in Mubarek in Kashkadarya Region mid-morning on Sunday 24 March. Eight adult Baptists and their four children were worshipping in his home. "Without explaining their actions and purpose they began filming all the people who were praying," Khanyukov told Forum 18 from Mubarek on 9 April.

When the Baptists asked the officials to show their identification documents, they responded: "It is enough that one of us is in a uniform." Even the uniformed officer refused to show any identification document or give his name or position, Khanyukov pointed out.

Leading the raid was a young official, in plain clothes, who gave his name and position as Alisher from the NSS secret police. He told the Baptists that "all believers are backward-looking fanatics who drag society down", Khanyukov complained to Forum 18.

Confiscation with no warrant

Then without the consent of Khanyukov and without showing any warrant, the officials entered his and his family members' private rooms in the home, and conducted a search. "They examined literally everything and even children's items in the cupboards," he told Forum 18. "They confiscated all personal notes, postcards, and family photographs of the Tursunovs, who are our fellow-believers and stay in our house."

The officials also confiscated the money they found in the church cash-box, Khanyukov told Forum 18. "We had some foreign and Uzbek currency in the box - 110 US Dollars, 5,000 Russian Roubles, and 93,000 Uzbek Soms [a total of about 1,750 Norwegian Kroner, 230 Euros or 300 US Dollars]." The officials did not draw up a confiscation record, he complained.

The officials then wrote down the names of the worshippers, and drawing up a report took Khanyukov to Mubarek Police Station. The Police questioned him for two hours before letting him leave, Khanyukov told Forum 18. He believes administrative charges will be brought against him and other Church members.

Repeated raids disrupt worship

Khanyukov told Forum 18 that it is "not the first time this Alisher comes to our worship meetings and disturbs us". He added that officials "disrupt our worship several times each year with searches, confiscations and then fines." Khanyukov pointed out that the raids take place "especially between February and March each year."

The Mubarek church has faced more than a decade of harassment from officials. As far back as 2003, after its services were raided and Khanyukov questioned, local Prosecutor Shurali Ashurov told Forum 18: "I constantly receive protest letters from Baptists from various parts of the world. I am fed up with reading them. A commission even came from Tashkent to verify the Baptists' complaints" (see F18News 24 April 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=37>).

Major Rajab Shavkatov, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division of Mubarek Police, denied the participation of his Division in the 24 March search. "I don't know which agencies participated, but it definitely was not from our division," he insisted to Forum 18 on 9 April. He added that he does not know any Police officer named Alisher in Mubarek.

The duty officer at Mubarek District Police - who did not give his name - told Forum 18 the same day that the Chief of the Police "asked that you write an official letter, and he will see whether or not they can respond." He declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Asked about the case, an officer who answered the phone at the NSS secret police in Mubarek on 10 April took down Forum 18's name, but then said it was a wrong number. When Forum 18 insisted and asked why NSS officer Alisher disrupted the Baptists' worship and why he insulted them, the officer put the phone down. Subsequent calls on the same day went unanswered.

Property seized

Bailiff Bahodir Alikulov of Mubarek City Court on 10 January confiscated property from church member Yelena Tursunova, as well as from Madina Juratayeva, who is not a believer but a relative of the church members, Baptists told Forum 18. The seizures were in lieu of unpaid fines from 2012. Four Police officers who accompanied Bailiff Alikulov confiscated and took away the property on his orders, the Baptists told Forum 18.

Bailiff Alikulov confiscated a washing machine and DVD disc player from Juratayeva's family, and a vacuum cleaner from the Tursunov family. Their value is "far more" than the amounts of the fines given to them for the alleged violations, the Baptists complained.

Said Tursunov, husband of Tursunova, also a church member, complained to Forum 18 on 9 April that Bailiff Alikulov did "not provide us any official papers" that he seized their property, and that the fine given to his wife was "roughly 35 US Dollars but the vacuum cleaner cost us roughly three times that amount when we bought it a couple of years ago." He said that they "cannot buy a new one at the moment since it will cost us even more than that now," and the amount is "almost half a month's earnings" for the family. "We will have to wait for some time until we save some money," he lamented.

Bailiff Alikulov denied that the value of the property he confiscated from the Baptists exceeded the fines. "My specialist adequately appraised them," he claimed to Forum 18 on 10 April. Asked why he did not take into account the low incomes and basic necessities of the families, Alikulov said that under Uzbek law he is not authorised to answer to third parties. However, he did not explain which law he was referring to when Forum 18 insisted with the question. He put the phone down.

Fines given in 2012

Tursunova was fined for unauthorised religious activity by Judge Ilhom Rahmankulov of Mubarek District Criminal Court on 2 April 2012. Fined with her were Khanyukov, and two other church members, Valeri Stepanov and Yekaterina Dyu. Other church members were given official warnings (see F18News 9 May 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1699>).

The Baptists told Forum 18 that the Court had also summoned Juratayeva to the same hearing as a defendant, since she happened to be in the same home where the officials raided the Baptists and so her name was recorded as a "violatee." She could not attend the hearing since she had to travel on that day to a hospital in the capital Tashkent with her sick child (who suffers with encephalopathy). The following day, 3 April 2012, Juratayeva was fined 250,000 Soms for "contempt of court", the Baptists told Forum 18.

Fined for discussing religion

Judge Abkhan Hashimov of Fergana Region's Kokand City Criminal Court on 11 January fined Rasuljon Ahmedov, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church, for missionary activity, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18. Missionary activity is banned by the Religion Law.

Ahmedov was found guilty under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 2 (violation of the Religion Law). Judge Hashimov fined him 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,591,800 Soms (4,500 Norwegian Kroner, 600 Euros or 775 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Judge Hashimov claims in his decision without giving any specifics that it was established that on 10 January Ahmedov "propagandised his religious beliefs to his neighbour S. Isakov [first name not given] (..) and offered him to receive the Christian religion". The Judge qualified this as missionary activity. The verdict is short - just one and a half pages - and gives no details as to how the alleged violation was established. It merely notes that Ahmedov and Isakov in their statements acknowledged the claims.

Asked on what basis he decided Ahmedov violated the Law, in other words was involved in illegal missionary activity, Judge Hashimov told Forum 18 on 10 April that he gave his arguments in the decision.

Told that the decision gives no other details other than that Ahmedov discussed his beliefs with his neighbour, and asked how a conversation between two neighbours about their beliefs can be qualified as missionary activity, Judge Hashimov declined to explain to Forum 18. "If you are not happy, you can complain," he said categorically, "I am the Judge, and I gave my decision." He then put the phone down.

Appeal against fines fails

Four Protestants fined in December 2012 for leading an unregistered worship meeting failed to overturn their fines on appeal. On 4 February, Tashkent Regional Court upheld the Region's Bostanlyk District Criminal Court 24 December 2012 decision handing down large fines to Gennady Chen, Vladimir Zhikhar, Aleksandr Lokshev and Gennady Timoyev, Protestants familiar with the case told Forum 18.

Each of the four was fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage or 3,979,500 Soms (11,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,500 Euros, or 2,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) (see F18News 31 January 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1797>).

Two more Protestants who participated in the same worship meeting were threatened by the authorities to be given similarly large fines. However, Forum 18 has learned that their cases did not reach court. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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=1170>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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