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Torture and impunity for torturers continues

Torture and impunity for torturers continues in Uzbekistan, directed against Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths. Women are targeted for assault, and in another torture case police told a Jehovah's Witness that complaining makes no difference as "we will remain unpunished".

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (12.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yuZ0eb> - Torture and impunity for torturers continues in Uzbekistan. In a series of incidents typical of cases involving Muslims, Protestants, and people of other faiths known to Forum 18, Jehovah's Witnesses exercising their freedom of religion and belief have been tortured by officials. The incidents documented below took place between January and June 2017, but similar incidents are known to be continuing.

Uzbekistan has also shown a total refusal to carry out its binding legal obligations in international law to both arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture, and to - under Article 4 of the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature". No such arrests or prosecutions are ever known to have happened (see below and Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

The names of the victims of the freedom of religion and belief and right to be free of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment violations described below are all anonymised, for fear of state reprisals.

In Nukus one Jehovah's Witness in jail was hit "on his kidneys, chest, stomach, and face. They then demanded that he do 150 squat exercises without taking a rest. When he was able to do only 120, the officers again beat him in the face". Later, police "kicked him on the back" and subsequently "[in freezing conditions] poured cold water on the floor of the cell and kicked him in the head". One of the officers stated to have done this told Forum 18 that "I do not know what you are talking about". Asked why the Anti-Terrorism Police

repeatedly raids and tortures people exercising their freedom of religion and belief and interlinked freedoms, the officer replied: "I cannot tell you why they can or cannot. I just don't want to talk to you" (see below)

When Forum 18 gave the names of the police officers it had been given to another official, and asked whether the authorities will take the measures international law requires Uzbekistan to take against them, they replied: "I cannot evaluate this, since we are not a law-enforcement agency" (see below).

In Namangan two police officers who are said to have tortured a Jehovah's Witness told them that if they complained "we will remain unpunished". Another police officer involved in a subsequent case claimed to Forum 18 that "they were not tortured". Prosecutor's Office officials claimed that questions could not be answered as they were "busy visiting the cotton fields" (see below).

In a Karshi case, when Forum 18 questioned a police officer who is said to have been part of a group of police who sexually assaulted women, they claimed that "I was not involved in that". When told that he and his colleagues sexually assaulted the women, he put the phone down (see below).

When in an Urgench case a complaint was made about officials' unlawful actions, Urgench City Prosecutor's Office wrote back that after investigation "no evidence of torture by officers of Urgench Police was found" (see below).

Torture and impunity normal, women particularly vulnerable

Torture, or threats of this, appears to be a normal experience for anyone subjected to official hostility – it is "routine" as the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) found in 2007. In December 2013 the CAT's Concluding Observations on the country (CAT/C/UZB/CO/4) noted with concern "numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement, investigative and prison officials". This leads to a climate of impunity for officials and the absence of the rule of law, where unjust trials with flagrant breaches of due process are normal. It is for very good reason rare for people to publicly document torture they experience, for fear of state reprisals (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

The CAT's December 2013 Concluding Ob also strongly criticised the absence of the state fulfilling its binding legal obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Uzbekistan acceded to on 28 September 1995, to: "carry out prompt, impartial and effective investigations into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment and prosecute and punish all those responsible, including law enforcement and prison officials" (see http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2fC%2fUZB%2fCO%2f4).

Women exercising their freedom of religion and belief are particularly vulnerable to targeting by male officials in Uzbekistan's highly patriarchal society, and there are strong social pressures against women speaking out about such human rights violations. Cultural traditions of "honour" can destroy a woman's reputation if she is known or thought to have been the victim of sexual violence or even if she has been alone – for example overnight - with male police officers who are unrelated to her. The use of sexual violence by male officials appears to be common, and is known to have been experienced by Muslim, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness women. Men exercising their freedom of religion and belief have also been threatened by police with being forced to witness their wives being raped (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

"I do not know what you are talking about"

On 12 January 2017 Nukus District Criminal Court, in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Region, jailed a Jehovah's Witness for 15 days under the Administrative Code's Article 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

During pre-trial questioning, police "beat him on his kidneys, chest, stomach, and face. They then demanded that he do 150 squat exercises without taking a rest. When he was able to do only 120, the officers again beat him in the face," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Eleven days into the Jehovah's Witness's 15-day jail term, he "was undressed and [Anti-Terrorism Police] officer Ulugbek kicked him on the back." On the 14th day of the jail term, Anti-Terrorism Police officers Ruslan Allanazarov, Umida Kurbanbaeva, Anvar and Yusup (whose last names are not known) "poured cold water on the floor of the cell and kicked him in the head". (The World Meteorological Organisation states that average January temperatures in Nukus are minus 4.8 degrees centigrade, or just over 23 degrees Fahrenheit.)

Asked why he and his colleagues tortured the Jehovah's Witness, officer Allanazarov on 4 October evaded the question. "I did not arrest him but the Court" he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 repeated the question, he claimed: "I do not know what you are talking about."

Asked why the Anti-Terrorism Police repeatedly raids and tortures people exercising their freedom of religion and belief and interlinked freedoms, officer Allanazarov responded: "I cannot tell you why they can or cannot. I just don't want to talk to you." He then put the phone down.

As this and many similar "Anti-Terrorism Police" cases illustrate, the regime's definition of "terrorism" includes people exercising their human rights (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Impunity for torturers

Asked whether Allanazarov and other police officers were punished for their torture of the Jehovah's Witness, an official (who would not give his name) when answering the phone of Karakalpakstan's regional Interior Minister Janabay Sadikov on 4 October referred Forum 18 to Colonel Salamat Madreimov, Head of Karakalpakstan's Anti-Terrorism Police. Madreimov's phones was not answered every time it was rung on 4 October.

Elmurod Tursunov, the official in Karakalpakstan's regional Justice Ministry overseeing religious organisations on 4 October claimed to Forum 18 that "We do not know about this case." He referred Forum 18 to Kayrat Abdimuratov, Assistant to the Chair of Karakalpakstan's regional Religious Affairs Committee.

Abdimuratov told Forum 18 the same day that Jehovah's Witnesses are "not registered in Karakalpakstan and they were punished for their illegal activity". Asked whether torture is also part of the punishment he claimed that "I do not know about this". When Forum 18 gave the names of the police officers, and asked whether the authorities will take the measures international law requires Uzbekistan to take against them, he responded: "I cannot evaluate this, since we are not a law-enforcement agency".

"The central authorities in Tashkent decide.."

Asked why Jehovah's Witnesses are not allowed to exist in Karakalpakstan, he replied, "We have only one non-Muslim religious community allowed here, the [Russian]

Orthodox Church." Asked why he replied: "The central authorities in Tashkent decide what organisations can be registered". He said that seven state-controlled mosques and one Russian Orthodox Church are the only registered religious organisations in Karakalpakstan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

"We will remain unpunished"

On 5 February Anti-Terrorism Police raided a Jehovah's Witness home meeting for worship in Namangan, in the western Fergana [Farghona] Valley. Officer Murod Khakimov and 10 colleagues raided the meeting without the search warrant the law requires. Such violations of the rule of law are common in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Four Jehovah's Witnesses were in a court hearing fined five times the minimum monthly salary under the Administrative Code's Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to five-day jail terms. While in jail, one of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was "severely beaten by two drunk [Anti-Terrorism Police] officers. They hit him on the ear, stomach, and face. While beating him, they threatened him with a longer period of detention and claimed that filing complaints would not improve his situation as "we will remain unpunished".

"They were not tortured" ?

On 19 March Anti-Terrorism Police raided Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in a café in Namangan. That raid was also led by officer Khakimov accompanied by six others. Police confiscated the personal belongings of those present, including electronic devices and printed publications. A court jailed two Jehovah's Witnesses for 15 days under Administrative Code Article 241. One of them had been jailed for five days in February.

"During their detention, [Anti-Terrorism Police] officers beat them on the back and the head. One officer beat one of the Jehovah's Witnesses on the head with a chair and grabbed him by his hair", Jehovah's Witnesses stated.

Officer Khakimov on 3 October claimed to Forum 18 that his "last name is Khamidov", and when asked why he and his colleagues raided and tortured Jehovah's Witnesses replied: "We opened an administrative case, but they were not tortured in detention." He then put the phone down.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that a complaint was filed to Namangan Regional Prosecutor's Office on 29 March. On 24 April Myrzakhit Tuychiev, Namangan city Prosecutor, wrote back that "no violations of the law were discovered in the actions of Officer Khakimov".

"Busy visiting the cotton fields"

On 31 July a complaints was then made to the General Prosecutor's Office. On 3 August R.N. Rakhmatov of that Office wrote back that the complaint had been forwarded to the Regional Prosecutor's Office. On 8 August Bakhromjon Irmatov, Deputy Prosecutor of Namangan Region, wrote back that the complaint had been forwarded to the city Prosecutor's Office. No further reply has been received as of today (12 October).

Asked about the case, the Prosecutor's General's Office on 10 October referred Forum 18 to Gulnoza Rakhimova, Chief of the Public Relations Department. Abdukadyr Ergashev,

who answered Rakhimova's phone, claimed that she is "busy in a meeting," and asked Forum 18 to call back on 11 October. On 11 October Ergashev claimed to Forum 18 that Rakhimova is "away at a conference." He then refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Rakhmatov or any other officials overseeing it.

Namangan city Prosecutor's officials (who would not give their names) on 11 October refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through Prosecutor Tuychiyev or any other officials. "The Prosecutor and his officials are busy visiting the cotton fields", they claimed.

Uzbekistan is one of the larger exporters of cotton in the world, and has for decades forced many adults and children (from the age of 10 upwards) to work its cotton fields. All profits go to the state, and environmental pollution is severe (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). The Cotton Campaign coalition, and other human rights defenders, have long campaigned to end forced and child labour in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (see <http://www.cottoncampaign.org>).

Women targeted

On 31 May Karshi [Qarshi] Police in southern Uzbekistan raided a home meeting for worship of Jehovah's Witnesses. As is common for such raids, there was no search warrant as required by law. "During the search four police officers, including Lieutenant Zhamol Sharopov, Zafar Obilov, Zokir, and Bunyod [whose last names are not known] confiscated electronic devices containing religious materials. The officers also "grabbed the breasts of women, claiming that they needed to check for electronic devices".

Asked on 10 October by Forum 18 why Karshi police led by him raided the Jehovah's Witness meeting, Lieutenant Sharopov claimed that: "I was not involved in that". When told that he and his colleagues sexually assaulted the women, he put the phone down. He did not answer subsequent calls to him.

"No evidence of torture" ?

On 28 June Urgench [Urganch] Police in Khorezm Region, in the west of Uzbekistan, detained a local Jehovah's Witness and brought him to their Police Station. "At the Station, [first name unknown] Sobirov from the City Administration twice strangled him and then grabbed him by the neck and beat his head against a table" Jehovah's Witnesses stated. Sobirov then "threatened him with death if he filed a complaint".

Jehovah's Witnesses complained to the General Prosecutor's Office about the officials' unlawful actions. On 16 July Umurbek Madrakhimov of Urgench City Prosecutor's Office wrote back that after investigation "no evidence of torture by officers of Urgench Police was found".

Asked about the case by Forum 18, an official who would not give his name of Khorezm Regional Administration claimed that the official responsible for such cases is Ravshan Sapayev. "Neither the City nor Regional Administration has any official named Sobirov is working for us", they claimed. He then referred Forum 18 to Sapayev.

Sapayev referred Forum 18 to Khamza Atakhanov, Deputy Head of Khorezm Administration, who oversees religious affairs. When Forum 18 asked Atakhanov on 10 October why the Jehovah's Witness was tortured, he claimed that "I cannot hear you well". However Forum 18 could hear him clearly. Subsequent calls to him were not answered.

On 10 October Urgench Police referred Forum 18 to Fakhriddin (who would not give his last name) of the Anti-Terrorism Police. Fakhriddin asked Forum 18 to call back in five

minutes. When called back he claimed that it was a "wrong number" and then put the phone down.

On 11 October an Urgench city Prosecutor's Office official (who would not give his name) who answered Prosecutor Madrakhikmov's phone refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Madrakhikmov.

Extra jail terms, no amnesty

Relatives of two sisters imprisoned since November 2009 for holding Muslim meetings are disappointed they were not amnestied in September. Both had three-year terms added to their sentences in 2016. The younger, 48-year-old Mehrinisso Hamdamova, has a tumour which relatives say is now "huge".

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (05.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kY5eQw> - Efforts by relatives of two Muslim prisoners of conscience, the sisters Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, to gain amnesty and release from prison in September were unsuccessful. The authorities jailed the two sisters in Karshi [Qarshi] more than seven years ago, for holding Muslim meetings for women without state permission. Both had three years added to their prison terms after their initial sentences expired.

Both sisters' health has long caused serious concern, especially that of the younger sister, 48-year-old Mehrinisso Hamdamova. She is suffering from a tumour which relatives say has grown to a "huge size". The authorities have denied both sisters medical treatment (see below).

Relatives of Khayrullo Tursunov, another Muslim prisoner of conscience who has been serving a 16-year jail term from June 2013, hope for his amnesty and release from prison. However, they told Forum 18 that his parents do not know who to approach and what steps to take, and "will be greatly thankful to those who can help them to do so" (see below).

Also hoping for his amnesty are relatives of Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Muslim from Tajikistan. He was jailed in Uzbekistan for five years for having the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone when he transited through Tashkent in 2013 (see below).

Meanwhile, Tashkent City Court on 25 August upheld the convictions of five Muslim believers who were among a group of eleven given long prison terms in May (see below).

Torture and impunity for torturers continues, directed against Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Women are targeted for assault, and in another torture case police told a Jehovah's Witness that complaining makes no difference as "we will remain unpunished" (see F18News 12 October 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2325).

Muslim sisters' prison terms extended

Relatives of two jailed Muslim sisters, Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, wrote to the prison authorities seeking their amnesty, they told Forum 18 on 4 October. They received a letter in August saying the request would be considered in September. "Unfortunately, they were not amnestied in September," relatives lamented. "Now we hope that they will be released in December but we are not sure."

Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova were arrested in November 2009, together with another female relative, to punish them for holding unauthorised religious meetings. Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court jailed the three at a closed trial in April 2010 for between six and a half and seven years (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1436).

Mehrinisso Hamdamova was due to be released in November 2016 but, despite suffering from a myoma (a tumour associated with uterine cancer), was given an additional three-year prison term, relatives told Forum 18. Relatives told Forum 18 that the authorities did "not tell us and we do not know on what grounds" her sentence was extended.

Similarly Zulhumor Hamdamova, who was due to be released in May 2016, had her prison term extended in August 2016 by three years for alleged violation of prison rules (see F18News 13 December 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2238).

Asked why the Hamdamova sisters were given new prison terms, the Interior Ministry's Main Office of Enforcement of Punishments referred Forum 18 on 3 October to the Head, Colonel Abdurazzak Kadyrov. Asked about the sisters' new prison terms, Kadyrov's secretary Nuriddin (who refused to give his last name) refused to put Forum 18 through to Kadyrov. "We cannot answer such questions over the phone. You need to come to the reception in person," he said. He further declined to talk to Forum 18 about the Hamdamova sisters and other prisoners of conscience.

Zulhumor Hamdamova was taken to a different prison in August 2016, where she was given the extended three year prison terms, relatives told Forum 18. She was then brought back to the same Zangiota 64/1 prison in Tashkent Region, where both she and her sister continue to serve their sentences.

Authorities' new conditions for release of sisters?

Local police officers and prison officials have told the sisters' relatives that "if Zulhumor's daughter and sons who are abroad return to the country, they will be pardoned and Zulhumor and Mehrinisso will be released from prison", relatives told Forum 18.

Zulhumor Hamdamova's children "escaped Uzbekistan since they were afraid that they too could be arrested when their mother and aunt were arrested", relatives added. The relatives said that they do "not know where they are hiding" and that they are "not sure whether they will return".

How long has Mehrinisso Hamdamova left to live?

Relatives, who visited the sisters in early August, expressed concern particularly about Mehrinisso Hamdamova's health. "Mehrinisso's myoma has grown to a huge size," they told Forum 18. "The prison authorities did not release any medical reports to us on how long she has left to live. It is now in a stage that the myoma cannot be surgically removed since it may be fatal."

The Hamdamova sisters' prison address:

Uzbekistan

Tashkent Region

Zangiota tumani

Uchr. 64/1

Hamdamova Mehrinisso Imomovna

or

Hamdamova Zulhumor Imomovna

State-appointed Imams visiting prison to determine who can be amnestied

Khayrullo Tursunov, another Muslim prisoner of conscience, was extradited back to his native Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan in March 2013 against the express wishes of the United Nations Committee Against Torture. That June a court in Kashkadarya Region handed him a 16-year jail sentence for the alleged "extremist" exercise of freedom of religion and belief (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

Tursunov – who is now 42 - was exposed to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (TB), when in December 2013 the authorities moved him to a TB prison. Later he was moved back to Karavulbazar Prison 64/25, and the authorities claimed to Forum 18 that he was cured (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

Tursunov's relatives visited him in prison "not so long ago", an individual who knows Tursunov and his family, and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 28 September 2017. Tursunov "appears to be doing fine," they added, and that "nothing has changed in his prison conditions". They could give no further details.

"[State-appointed] Imams are said to be visiting prisons to talk to Muslim prisoners to sort out who can be amnestied," the individual told Forum 18. However, Tursunov has "not been interviewed so far". Tursunov's father and mother "are not well-educated and do not know who to talk or write to for their son's amnesty. They will be immensely thankful if somebody helps them in this."

Also hoping for amnesty

Also hoping for his amnesty are relatives of the 41-year-old Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Muslim from Tajikistan imprisoned in Uzbekistan for carrying the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone as he transited through Tashkent.

Arrested in September 2013, Mirzorakhimov was sentenced in Tashkent the following month to five years' imprisonment in a general regime labour camp under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1 ("Smuggling, that is carriage through the customs border .. without the knowledge of or with concealment from customs control .. materials that propagandise religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism"). Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected his appeal in November 2013 (see F18News 17 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149).

Mirzorakhimov's relatives told Forum 18 from Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on 28 September 2017 that there are "no changes in his prison conditions". His wife visited him in prison in early September and he is "doing fine", they added.

Though Mirzorakhimov's prison term is due to end in September 2018, the family hopes that he will be amnestied in December 2017. "We were hoping that Zuboyd could be amnestied in September but this did not happen," they told Forum 18

Jail terms for discussing faith upheld

On 25 August a panel of Judges at Tashkent City Criminal Court, including Orif Klychev, Khamro Berdyklichev and S. Karimov, upheld the lengthy prison terms given by the same

Court three months earlier to five Muslims, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent that day. The five were the brothers Bakhadyr and Ravshan Sadykov, Davron Fayziyev, Sobirjon Khasanov and Abdurashid Rashidov.

The five were among eleven Muslim men punished for meeting in homes and teahouses to discuss their faith. The other six sentenced Muslims appear not to have appealed against their convictions.

On 26 May Tashkent City Criminal Court handed down prison sentences of five to six years to the eleven. One of the eleven, Khusnuddin Rizayev, a 39-year old professor of Tashkent's State Pedagogical University, had already been sentenced in a separate case on 25 January. That sentence has been combined with the sentence handed down on 26 May (see F18News 20 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2288).

"The hearing of the appeal was just a formality," human rights defender Ikramov complained to Forum 18. "The panel of Judges spent only 35 minutes on the hearing before announcing the decision. The judicial charade continues in Uzbekistan."

Judge Klichev refused to comment on the appeal decision. "We cannot discuss this over the phone. You need to come to the Court in person," he told Forum 18 on 3 October. Told that human rights defenders had told Forum 18 the case had been fabricated, and asked how Rizayev, one of the defendants, who worked for a Tashkent University which presented the Court with positive testimony of him, could be deemed an "extremist", Klichev responded: "Yes, I know, he was a professor but I cannot comment." He declined to talk further to Forum 18.

The Russia patriarch in Uzbekistan, a symbol of Islamic-Christian coexistence

By Vladimir Rozanskij

AsiaNews.it (03.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xQKYph> - On October 1, Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow Kirill (Gundjaev) made an official visit to Uzbekistan to celebrate the 145th anniversary of the establishment of the Orthodox Eparchy of Tashkent, the capital of Central Asia's most populous nation. The Russians have close ties with the Turkish-Mongolian populations of these countries, who from rulers at the time of the Tatars, were dominated by Russians in the 19th century and Soviet times, with Uzbekistan being one of the 15 republics of the USSR.

The Russian minority, almost 2 million out of 27 million people, is the most important in size after the Uzbek people, and alongside ethnicities from other countries. It is an important part of the "Russian world" for which the Moscow Patriarchate is pastorally responsible outside its own borders, and is largely found in the former Soviet republics where an intense Russification policy was conducted. At the official ceremony held in the Turkestan Palace in Tashkent, the head of the Russian Church met with the widow of President Islam Karimov, who led the country from the end of the Soviet Union until his death just a year ago, and his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev, elected last December after serving as long-time prime minister and Karimov's main right hand man.

The previous day, visiting the historic city of Samarkand, the patriarch knelt before the relics of the prophet Daniel, located in a city mausoleum and revered by Christians and Muslims. According to local tradition, the prophet inspired preacher Kusama ibn Abbas, protagonist of the city's conversion to Islam.

Good relations between Orthodox and Muslims

During the visit, Kirill praised the good relations between the local orthodox and the Muslim majority, inviting the people of the country to safeguard peace in interreligious relationships and to be an example for all. "This capacity for reciprocity is not easy to maintain," said the patriarch during the consecration of the new Tashkent cathedral - "in many countries there are bloody conflicts between religions, which complicate coexistence in society... That is why we must have particular regard for the social and inter-religious cohesion of a country where religions learn to cooperate with each other. "

According to government data, there are 2239 religious communities in Uzbekistan of 16 different confessions, including some fifty Orthodox churches.

Kirill acknowledged that this favourable condition would not be possible without the active support of the political institutions, guaranteeing equal opportunities for all confessions, orthodox as well as Muslims. This means that the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian citizens of Uzbekistan not only actively participate in the life of society, but are also exemplary orthodox, showing the evangelical and dialogic face of the Christian faith. At the same time, in front of representatives of the Uzbek institutions, the patriarch pointed out that the Orthodox Church has no pretence of interfering in the political life of any country: "The testimony of faith in our Church - he said - has never been an instrument to pressure or spread of our influence among people ... If we compare the orthodox mission to that of some Western confessions, which has often been accompanied by violence, oppression and pursuit of political ends, we have never attempted to affirm our faith on anyone, not even on our own faithful. "

There should be no hidden agendas in the witness of Orthodox faithful, which "would soon be discovered" and would contradict the Gospel. The Russian Church seeks only to assist its faithful, though "it is not a national community, nor a political order or a representative of another state." In it there is room for everyone, the patriarch has said, and it is ready to collaborate with any state and with its institutions. Kirill's words seemed to be addressed also to other countries, in particular the Ukraine, of the "enemy" Poroshenko, with whom there has been an ongoing exchange of accusations of interference that further poisons the conflict between the two Slavic countries Eastern.

Lukashenko's proposal

Meanwhile, just as Kirill visited Central Asia, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, leader of the third "orthodox" nation, said he was following the process of dialogue and collaboration between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic church. Speaking at the plenary of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), which met recently in Minsk, Lukashenko recalled the 2016 Cuban meeting between Kirill and Francis, hoping it would be possible to repeat such a meeting in a place that is not too distant, maybe in Minsk. In Belarus, the collaboration between Orthodox and Catholics is very fruitful; the Catholic Church has nearly 2 million faithful out of 10 million inhabitants, over half of whom are Orthodox. For the president, Belarus is "the ideal country to discuss the problems of East and West, North and South and all over the planet."

The Holy See did not comment on Lukashenko's proposal, but some Orthodox representatives agreed with the president. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has also found space for mediation in the capital of the white Russia, with those "Minsk agreements" that have so far stopped the degeneration of the clashes, and which everyone wishes return to in order to finally reach a lasting peace.

Religious freedom survey, September

Freedom of religion and belief, with interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, remains severely restricted in Uzbekistan. Forum

18's survey analysis documents violations including: raids, fines, imprisonment and torture; education and worship meetings without state permission being banned; and religious literature censorship and destruction.

By Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan

Forum 18 (11.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2g9ndig> - Freedom of religion or belief is, with intrinsically linked freedoms such as those of expression, association, and assembly, seriously restricted in Uzbekistan. Officials frequently violate freedom of thought, conscience and belief and other interlinked human rights, violating the government's legally-binding international human rights commitments. These restrictions on human rights are part of the regime's intentional systemic policy to control every aspect of society. This is why followers of all religions and beliefs - with no exceptions - face freedom of religion or belief violations.

Creating fear of the state is apparently an integral part of the policy of imposing state control of society. Physical violence and torture, or threats of this, appears to be a normal experience for anyone subjected to official hostility – it is "routine" as the United Nations (UN) Committee Against Torture has found. This leads to a climate of impunity for officials and the absence of the rule of law, where unjust trials with flagrant breaches of due process are normal. It is for very good reason rare for people to publicly document such abuses, for fear of state reprisals.

All exercise of freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission is illegal, including sharing any beliefs with anyone, and meeting with others for worship or the study of sacred texts in homes. "Law enforcement" officials raid with impunity people of all faiths meeting together to exercise freedom of religion and belief. Those taking part in such meetings are very often threatened, detained, subjected to violent physical assault and torture, given large fines, and have religious literature – including Islamic texts and the Bible - confiscated and destroyed. Officials impose severe censorship on all religious literature. Muslims meeting to study the Koran and learn how to pray at home are likely, if found, to be jailed for long periods. Strict restrictions are imposed both on observing Ramadan and ongoing on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca.

Context

Uzbekistan has the third largest surface area of the five Central Asian states and, with over 32 million people, the largest population. Government statistics say 83 per cent of the population are ethnic Uzbeks (regarded as being of mostly Sunni Muslim background), with 5 per cent Tajiks, some 2 per cent Kazakhs and another 2 per cent Karakalpaks (regarded as being of mostly Sunni Muslim background). Russians and other Slavs (regarded as being of mostly Orthodox background) make up less than 3 per cent.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has run Uzbekistan since September 2016, and has (like his predecessor Islam Karimov) never won an election judged free and fair by reputable international observers. Local and international human rights defenders have documented cases of electoral fraud, corruption, and many violations of human rights and the rule of law. Despite large mineral and other resources, much of the population remains in poverty. The country is one of the larger exporters of cotton in the world, and has for decades forced many adults and children (from the age of 10 upwards) to work its cotton fields. All profits go to the state, and environmental pollution is severe.

Islam

Islam, because it has the largest number of followers, is the community the regime is most interested in controlling. This control is mainly exercised from the inside, by for example appointing all permitted leaders and banning all public manifestations of Islam outside the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. The state

through the Muftiate also controls what imams preach, and the number and location of mosques.

The state completely controls the selection, education and nomination of imams, in defiance of Article 61 of the Constitution: "Religious organisations and associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The state does not interfere in the activities of religious associations." It is virtually impossible for any potential imam to graduate from a madrassah (Islamic religious college) if they are thought by the state to be critical of the regime. The National Security Service (NSS) secret police has informers and agents among students, and students have told Forum 18 that the NSS periodically summons them to be questioned about whether any student is making critical comments about the regime.

Ramadan

Ramadan each year sees stricter than usual controls on Islamic communities. In the 2016 Ramadan, the regime banned shared Muslim iftar (breaking of fast) meals in public in the capital Tashkent. The bans also appear to have covered the three-day Ramazon hayit (Id al-fitr) festival, which marks the end of the month of Ramadan and is marked with prayers and meals.

The regime also continued to ban people under 18 from attending mosques, and in Tashkent schoolteachers and police were placed at the entrances of mosques to stop people under 18 entering. In Andijan [Andijon] Region the local Education Department instructed parents to sign letters that they would not (among other things) allow their children to attend mosque prayers throughout the summer. One Andijan mosque placed a sign outside it banning children and mentally-ill children from entering. A local education official told Forum 18 that the reason for the ban was that "children can be misled in mosques", but would not answer when asked if this was an official opinion or why she thought state-controlled imams would mislead people.

The haj

Restrictions on how many pilgrims can take part in the annual haj pilgrimage to Mecca are severe. Only 7,200 out of a potential quota of about 30,000 allocated by the Saudi authorities (based on Muslim population numbers) travelled on the 2017 pilgrimage. An "unwritten instruction" bans would-be pilgrims under the age of 45. Waiting times are long. One potential pilgrim told Forum 18 in September 2015 that she would need to live to be 205 years old to reach the top of the waiting list in her mahalla. Her mahalla head told Forum 18 that she "will be able to go in 20 or 30 years". Even successful applicants can be arbitrarily removed and replaced with the friends or family members of officials. Also, "unofficial payments" to officials can more than double the cost of the haj. "The number of applicants would be much, much higher if the cost was not so high," an imam who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in 2011.

Mahalla committees, theoretically independent but in practice under state control, are used to maintain controls over anyone trying to exercise freedom of religion and belief, and have been used to block registration attempts by Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses (see below). They are also used in periodic crackdowns on all religious communities, as well as to monitor members of the majority Muslim community.

Pilgrims are officially screened. An application to go on the haj is made in writing, with a copy of the applicant's passport. Each mahalla committee submits to the local administration its list of applicants for the haj. Local administrations, along with the NSS secret police, the Muftiate and the state Religious Affairs Committee check each applicant and endorse or reject the application. The central mahalla of a district then compiles a waiting list of applicants. When applicants' turn to go on pilgrimage comes up, they are invited to the local district administration and instructed to collect more documents,

including certificates of their place of residence, their health, and a reference letter from their local mahalla committee. The letter gives information about their personal qualities and charitable works.

Even successful passage of this process does not guarantee a haj pilgrimage. Uzbekistan uses exit visas – a Soviet-era idea - to control which of its citizens are allowed to leave the country. Citizens need an exit visa every two years to visit any other country except nine other former Soviet states. President Mirziyoyev in August 2017 signed a decree claiming to abolish exit visas from January 2019. Even if exit visas are eventually abolished, the NSS secret police maintains an exit blacklist of people – for example human rights defenders – who are not allowed to travel abroad.

Officials give special instructions to successful haj applicants on how to behave on pilgrimage, including not to talk to foreigners. These instructions are typically given at meetings for all approved pilgrims. NSS secret police officers reportedly accompany the haj pilgrims.

Other religious communities

For other religious communities, the regime's primary interest is to keep them within closely controlled geographic and activity related boundaries. Communities of all faiths which want to gain state permission to exist – which requirement violates international human rights law - must pass through a complex registration procedure, including having 100 adult Uzbek citizens willing both to be identified as founders and to supply their personal details to the authorities. Even if communities are larger than 100 people, many are unwilling to be so identified to the authorities as founders.

The only communities allowed to exist in the north-west region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'iston] are mosques of the state-controlled Muftiate and one Russian Orthodox parish. All other collective expressions of freedom of religion and belief are banned. A human rights defender from the region told Forum 18 in August 2017 that the regime keeps local Protestants "in constant fear", with surveillance, threats, raids, fines and short-term imprisonments.

Other obstacles to gaining state permission to exist for all religious communities include: paying a non-refundable fee equivalent to 50 times the minimum monthly wage; then submitting two letters of guarantee - one from the district Hokimat (administration), confirming that the organisation to be registered has a building which corresponds to health and fire safety requirements - and one from the mahalla committee (the lowest level of district administration), stating that other mahalla residents do not object to the organisation. This written approval is necessary before a religious community can even apply for state registration from the Justice Ministry. Public health, fire safety, and similar regulations have also been used to bar registration and to harass religious communities, through inspections allegedly to check whether registered communities are observing regulations.

The ban on the unregistered exercise of freedom of religion and belief is underpinned by various articles in the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code. Administrative Code Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Part 1 punishes: "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Punishments range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage to being jailed for up to 15 days.

Even when a religious community has followed the state's demands and obtained permission to exist from a local authority, registration – and hence permission to exercise freedom of religion and belief - can still be refused. Indeed, many religious

communities do not get as far as this. Registration of new communities, or communities which have long existed but which the regime does not like – such as Jehovah's Witnesses - remains almost impossible. It also does not guarantee that they will keep registration and stay open if granted registration – even if they comply in full with all the authorities' formal demands.

Religious communities – whether Muslim or of other faiths – are not able to buy, build or open places of worship freely. Some places of worship have been confiscated, many rural mosques having reportedly been closed or stripped of their registration. Similarly, some Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Hare Krishna and Baha'i communities have been stripped of registration for no known reason.

Although Uzbek is the state language, the authorities ban non-Muslim communities from using it as the main language for worship services. The authorities have never explained why they impose this ban, which is not enshrined in any published law.

The experience of many communities, registered or unregistered, is that repression can occur at any time, with no regard for whether or not a community is registered. Police and NSS secret police raids, or expulsions of Muslim, Protestant and Hare Krishna university students affect followers of registered or unregistered communities.

Even if communities are registered, they are subject to intrusive demands from the authorities. In April 2007, Andijan [Andijon] regional Hokimat ordered a pastor of a registered Protestant church to draw up a plan with the Religious Affairs Committee "to prevent missionary activity". Communities like the Council of Churches Baptists who - as is their right in international law - refuse to seek registration with the state are targeted for raids and large fines. They refuse on principle to register, as they have found that registration leads to state interference in the exercise by their communities of freedom of religion and belief in line with international human rights law.

Surveillance

State officials control all exercise of freedom of religion and belief. The NSS secret police carries out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during meetings for worship, and the recruitment of spies within communities – including among leaders.

In March 2017, Protestants in Tashkent suspected that a woman who attended their meetings for worship might be an informer for the authorities. They told Forum 18 that she was the last before a raid to enter a flat where five Protestant women were meeting to discuss their faith, left the door unlocked "against security measures", and hung a towel from the window of the flat before the raid. "We think that the towel may have been a sign to the authorities that we were having a teaching session," Protestants stated.

Even Uzbek citizens outside the country face regime attempts to stop them exercising freedom of religion and belief. Davron Komoliddinov was jailed in November 2015 for seven years after being extradited from Russia, for posting Islamic sermons on a Russian social media network. Human rights defenders say the regime often uses Uzbek labour migrants to Russia to incriminate other Uzbek migrants they work or live with. The authorities usually extort confessions from one or two such labour migrants against others, and then use Interpol to search for those they want. Prisoner of conscience Komoliddinov was tortured after an unfair trial and his state-appointed defence lawyer, whose relatives state did not participate in hearings, told Forum 18 that he was asked to participate by the NSS secret police.

"Legally" preventing human rights

Punishments can continue and be imposed disproportionately for a long time after an alleged "offence". In 2012 Gulchohra Norbayeva was fired from her job as a teacher for insisting on wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). But even some years later she still faced police summonses, house searches for religious literature, accusations she was teaching the Koran "illegally", and pressure to sign statements incriminating Muslim men she did not know. Police told her that whether or not she wears the hijab, she will remain on the Preventative Register.

This Register was created under the 2014 Law on Prevention of Violations of the Law, which gives wide-ranging powers to state bodies, including committees which run mahallas [local districts], as well as non-state and non-commercial public organisations and ordinary citizens. This formalised what already happens in practice, and among the Law's targets are people exercising freedom of religion or belief or other human rights without state permission.

The Prevention Law automatically places people convicted by the courts on a Preventive Register, subjecting them to a variety of police "preventative measures" for one year or more. Many state-run organisations, from health care to nature protection agencies, are able to initiate placing individuals on the Preventive Register, including allowing many possibilities for officials to arbitrarily arrange for people to stay on the Register for many years. The Law also gives mahalla committees wide powers to among other things with police "take measures to prevent the activity of unregistered religious organisations". It also "legalises unofficial informers" a legal expert from Tashkent noted to Forum 18.

Article 29 of the Prevention Law specifies "prevention measures" used against individuals, including: prophylactic talks; official warnings; "social rehabilitation"; placing on the Preventive Register; referral for compulsory treatment; and administrative supervision.

Under Article 31 individuals are required to sign any written warning they are given. If the individual refuses to sign, this is also noted. The official issuing the warning can also inform the individual's employer (if they are working), their educational establishment (if they are studying), and the mahalla committee where they live.

Article 34 states that those on the Preventive Register are subjected to a range of preventive measures from the police aimed at "correcting them and warning against the conducting of repeat offences". Those subjected to the Preventive Register include former prisoners, as well as those convicted of a wide range of administrative offences.

If an individual has been punished for more than one separate crime or offence, they are listed on the Preventive Register separately for each reason.

Censorship and raids to "isolate the population"

Religious literature in Uzbekistan is under tight state control. Summarising the reason for censorship and raids targeting religious texts, a March 2016 state news agency article stated that the government aimed to "isolate the population". The import and production of literature – including the Koran and the Bible – is strictly controlled. This includes material on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media, with compulsory prior censorship by the Religious Affairs Committee. The International Post Office confirmed to Forum 18 in 2007 that imported copies of the Koran in Arabic were censored by the Religious Affairs Committee. Only registered communities can seek permission to print or import material.

A January 2014 Cabinet of Ministers Decree on religious literature requires the State Customs Committee and the State Borders Protection Committee (part of the NSS secret police) to confiscate all religious materials being imported, even for private use only. They are to be sent for "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee, and only if approved handed back to travellers.

Criminal Code Article 246 Part 1 punishes "Smuggling, that is carriage through the customs border .. without the knowledge of or with concealment from customs control .. materials that propagandise religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism". This is punishable by imprisonment for between 10 and 20 years. Along with Criminal Code Article 244-1 (see below) it has since 2013 increasingly been used to prosecute and jail Muslims carrying the Koran and Islamic sermons on mobile phones.

Relatively little literature about the majority Islamic faith is allowed to be published, and none is imported officially. Some Islamic books are no longer published, such as Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari's book "Sahih al-Bukhari". This is a collection of hadiths which Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic compilation.

Censorship of religious literature is required under Article 19 of the Religion Law. Only central administrations of registered religious organisations (i.e. those that have registered communities in at least eight of Uzbekistan's 14 Regions) are allowed to produce, import, export or distribute religious literature. The Article adds: "Delivery and distribution of religious literature published abroad is done after expert analysis of its contents is carried out in the order prescribed by law." The Article also bans the "manufacture, storage and distribution of printed items, films, photographs, audio and video recordings and other materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism".

Administrative Code Article 184-2 punishes: "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Punishments are a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution". Criminal Code Article 244-3 punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature". It carries – if there has been a previous administrative conviction – punishment of a fine of between 100 and 200 times the minimum monthly wage, or up to three years' corrective labour.

Religious literature (including Korans and Bibles), videos, DVDs – whether Muslim, Protestant Christian, Jehovah's Witness, Baha'i or of other faiths – are routinely confiscated in ordinary police and NSS secret police raids on places of worship and homes. Even legally imported materials as well as Uzbek-produced materials that have passed the censorship are confiscated. The Religious Affairs Committee routinely tells prosecutors and courts that such literature is "extremist", "banned" or "not for use outside a registered religious community".

"Expert analyses", book burning

Either the state's Religious Affairs Committee or - in provincial areas - teachers at local university philosophy departments decide whether religious material should be banned by producing so-called "expert analyses". Courts frequently order that such confiscated material be destroyed.

Courts often ignore legal violations in "expert analyses". A November 2012 "analysis" prepared by Begzod Kadyrov, Chief Specialist of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, claimed he had within one day read 1,300 books, 2,100 brochures, 450 leaflets, 50 magazines, watched 200 video cassette tapes, and listened to 350 audio cassette-tapes. "This beats the Guinness Book of Records", a local Protestant observed to Forum 18. Violations of legal procedure are commonplace in such cases, such as when a court ordered a Bible and New Testament destroyed after an "expert analysis" by an official of the local Muslim Board. This occurred even though the Religious Affairs Committee is the only body authorised to conduct such "analyses".

Such alleged "expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate. Numerous court verdicts seen by Forum 18 order that such literature – including Muslim books or Christian Bibles - be destroyed, which is

often carried out by burning. In March 2017 Judge Alisher Kahharov fined Dilrom Khudoyberganova 100 times the monthly minimum wage, ordered the confiscation of her mobile phone, and ordered the destruction of a book after police found her carrying her groceries and a book containing the three short New Testament texts the First, Second, and Third Letters of John with commentaries in Uzbek.

Postal and electronic censorship

Uzbekistan's postal authorities actively collaborate in censorship of publications sent from abroad. One customs Inspector told Forum 18 that 80 to 90 per cent of all imported or posted religious literature confiscated is Muslim. The Post Office routinely opens parcels of religious books and magazines sent from abroad, sending examples to the Religious Affairs Committee who decide whether to destroy the literature or return it to the sender. "I do not understand why normal religious books need to be confiscated or destroyed", a post office employee told Forum 18 in October 2011. But, they continued, "we are small persons, and need to obey orders". Information from abroad on the internet which the authorities dislike, including Forum 18's own website, also continues to be blocked.

Criminal Code Article 244-1 punishes the "production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order". Its paragraph 2 punishes: "Dissemination of materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion for purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and public order".

Part 1 of the Article punishes "production and storage". Part 2 punishes "dissemination". Part 3 (a) punishes this "crime" with prior planning or by groups of individuals, Part 3 (b) punishes it by officials, and Part 3 (c) punishes this "with financial or other material aid from religious organisations, as well as foreign states, organisations, and citizens".

In April 2016, Article 244-1's possible punishments were increased to imprisonment of between 5 and 8 years, instead of the previous up to 5 years' jail or a fine of between 300 and 400 times the minimum monthly wage. It is normally used only against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

The growth in the use of electronic devices in recent years has seen officials devote increasing attention to them. Officials often search mobile phones and other electronic devices in the hunt for religious materials. Punishments can be severe, and from around 2013 the authorities have often jailed for up to five years or fined Muslims (including foreign citizens) found with the Koran and Muslim sermons on their mobile phones. As with other "crimes", a local Christian leader told Forum 18 in June 2016, "the authorities usually fine or jail for short periods of time Christians and people from other non-Muslim communities".

From April 2016, a new Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 3 (d) banned "criminal" activities "using the mass media or telecommunication networks, as well as the world wide web". At the same time the regime harshened Criminal Code Articles 244-1 and 244-2 (see below) to allow: criminal prosecutions without a previous Administrative Code prosecution; increased jail terms, including between 15 and 20 years jail for involving people under 16 in "illegal" religious organisations; a ban on "production, storage or dissemination of the ideas or symbols of religious extremist or terrorist organisations"; and increased mass media, telecommunications and internet restrictions.

One human rights defender, Shukhrat Rustamov, commented to Forum 18 in June 2016 that the April 2016 amendments – as well as the existing Religion Law, Criminal and

Administrative Codes – are against the Constitution. He noted that, with the changes, "the authorities want to impose a total blockade of information for religious believers".

No religious books allowed in homes

Police confiscate personal religious literature during raids on homes, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. Courts frequently order such religious literature - including Bibles and New Testaments - destroyed. Raids and searches can be on a large scale. In March 2016, 20 NSS secret police and ordinary police officers searched every home in an entire district of the capital Tashkent. Local police told Forum 18 that "we have religious freedoms".

Followers of a variety of beliefs are afraid to keep religious literature in their homes, a cross-section of people have told Forum 18. Baptists told Forum 18 in June 2013 that "Church members have repeatedly been warned recently that keeping a Bible at home is allowed, but reading it can only be done at specially designated places for carrying out religious rituals". Such warnings are set out in "expert analyses" of confiscated literature by the Religious Affairs Committee, and presented to courts to justify confiscations and fines on owners. After an early 2017 raid on a Tashkent Hare Krishna devotee's home resulting in the confiscation of about 40 religious books and a fine, the Religious Affairs Committee told her that devotees can have only one copy of the faith's five main books at home. Any other books have to be held at their state-registered temple in Tashkent.

Raids to seize "illegal" religious literature frequently involve the authorities breaking published laws, but no officials are known to have been held to account for this. Asked in June 2016 whether people have freedom of religion and belief, a Judge told Forum 18 "maybe". Many Christians have hidden their religious literature, the Protestant noted. Other Christians have taken all the books they have to state-registered places of worship. The state's pressure is so strong that some believers think they have no choice but to destroy their own sacred texts. The Protestant also cited with distress cases where individuals have reluctantly destroyed their own Christian books, including Bibles. "I personally know of three such cases," the Protestant told Forum 18. "Many other Christians said to me they can't bring themselves to destroy their Bibles."

Meeting with others for worship or the study of sacred texts in homes is banned. In June 2016 four leaders of a Sufi Naqshbandi Muslim community were jailed for 4 years under Criminal Code Article 216 ("Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities"). The four leaders were among 15 Sufis arrested in Karakul District during a police raid on a home where a community was performing the zikr, a devotional practice of reciting sacred phrases. The following month, 11 other members of the same community were each fined up to 4,000,000 Soms (then 11,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,200 Euros or 1,300 US Dollars at the highly inflated official exchange rate) for illegally meeting in homes.

Similarly, in August 2015 four members of two Muslim families near Tashkent were jailed for between one and two months and about 18 others were fined under Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2 for: "Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies". Ten women were then detained and fined for the same "offence", one woman being threatened with being jailed with men who might rape her. So-called "Anti-Terrorism Police" then raided the homes of eight male relatives of the women who met occasionally to pray together, discuss their faith and share meals. The men were warned that they too would be jailed if they did not stop praying together. As these cases illustrate, the regime's definition of terrorism includes people exercising their human rights.

Non-Muslims are also targeted. Between January and May 2016, 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses were each fined up to 60 times the minimum monthly wage. "Anti-Terrorism Police" with ordinary police often conduct illegal searches of homes without a

search warrant, as happened in some cases. Known cases also involve Jehovah's Witnesses being stopped and searched as they left Fergana [Farghona], and the possible use of a police agent provocateur to entrap two Urgench [Urganch] female Jehovah's Witnesses as they shared their beliefs and literature with a woman in a flat. In May 2016, a Judge upheld fines for illegal religious literature on 14 Protestants who met to mark International Woman's Day, the fines totalling 350 times the minimum monthly wage.

The ban on religious literature in homes causes particular difficulties for those who do not have state-registered places of worship, such as Council of Churches Baptists. Contrary to Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, the state bans Council of Churches Baptists from having places of worship where religious literature might be kept.

Religious texts in public places also face a de facto ban. In spring 2015, Doniyor Akhmedov – a Baptist – was one of three Protestants in Uzbekistan known to have been imprisoned for between seven and 15 days. He was held after offering a religious leaflet to a passer-by on the street. For the last part of his 15-day imprisonment, Akhmedov "was held in a small cell with more than 10 people, where they were squeezed in and there was barely space to sleep on the floor", Forum 18 was told. After he was freed he was fined more than three years' official minimum wage.

Torture

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" the UN Committee Against Torture found in 2007. Torture methods used include asphyxiation with a gas mask (which police call the "little elephant") and severe physical violence including rape, leading to concussion accompanied by police pressure on hospitals not to treat victims. Torture and threats usually follow the frequent police and secret police raids against unregistered religious communities.

The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Uzbekistan acceded to on 28 September 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention, Uzbekistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture. Under Article 4, Uzbekistan is obliged to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature". No such arrests or prosecutions are known to have happened.

Many victims (including children) of widespread use of torture normally choose not to complain or make their suffering public, because of the traumatic nature of their experiences, fear of state reprisals, and strong social pressures against women in particular speaking out about male violence. In addition, cultural traditions of "honour" can destroy a woman's reputation if she is known or thought to have been the victim of sexual violence or even if she has been alone – for example overnight - with male police officers who are unrelated to her.

Women in particular are often assaulted, including the use of sexual violence, by male officials. In July 2017 ordinary police and "Anti-Terrorism Police" in Urgench raided a meeting where 27 Protestants were worshipping. Some of the 25 officers were carrying machine guns, and only six were in police uniform. During the arrests, interrogations,

and literature confiscations which followed, the women were forcibly undressed down to their underwear. Police denied any knowledge of this when questioned by Forum 18.

Similarly, in February 2016, four female Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand were questioned by senior police station officer Sanjar Esanov, his subordinates Lieutenant Askarali Boykobilov and Officer Sobir Rakhimov, as well as Khusrav Shamsiyev of Samarkand's "Anti-Terrorism Police". The officers were "drunk and very aggressive", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "They demanded that the women deny their faith." Lieutenant Boykobilov "roughly grasped the shoulders of [one of the women] and kept pushing her". Another was also "pushed", and Officer Shamsiyev "slapped her on the face". Chief Officer Esanov took another of the four women to a dark room and "strangled her and hit her on the body", as did officer Rakhimov. Officer Esanov threatened to "undress her and rape her, after which he will take her out of the room naked so the others could see. Then he began unbuttoning her overcoat but she resisted and he stopped".

Officials ignore formal complaints about torture. In June 2013, officers at a police station in the north-western Khorezm Region hit Sardorbek Nurmetov, a Protestant, five times on the head and chest with a thick book, and kicked his legs. As a result, Nurmetov became "dizzy, weakened, and felt like vomiting". Police refused his requests to call an ambulance. After he went to hospital on being released, hospital officials – who refused to send an ambulance when they realised it was to help a torture victim – themselves informed police, who took Nurmetov to a police station to pressure him not to complain. Despite this, Nurmetov did submit a formal complaint at the police station, demanding that action be taken. Urgench Police, instead of taking action against those implicated in the crime of torture, opened an administrative case against Nurmetov for "illegally" storing religious materials in his home.

Children and young people

Police and schoolteachers have told children that if they attend any place of worship – including mosques and churches – they will be punished. Children and young people are not formally banned from attending meetings for worship, but officials frequently pressure parents and communities of all faiths not to allow them to attend. In August 2014 teachers and doctors were forced to help the police identify school-age boys attending worship in Tashkent mosques "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers," human rights defender Abdurakhmon Eshanov told Forum 18. Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansurov claimed to Forum 18 that both Sharia law and the Religion Law ban children from attending prayers. He then added: "I wish the Law would allow it". After "Anti-Terrorism Police" raids in Namangan Region on Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, state-sponsored media attacks noted that "even under-age children" had been present at their meetings.

Even nursing infants can be targeted. In Tashkent in November 2015 "Anti-Terrorism Police" raided a Protestant home after the headteacher of a school told District Police that two pupils were sharing their beliefs with fellow-pupils. Officers physically tortured detained Protestants, and prevented the parents of five nursing infants from feeding their infants unless they wrote statements against fellow-Protestants. A court later fined them for exercising freedom of religion and belief.

Official imams have complained that they cannot teach Islam to children. Non-state controlled religious education is forbidden. In June 2013 a Muslim father and son who taught the Koran to school-age children in Tashkent Region were prosecuted. Both men – Mirmuhiddin Mirbayzaiyev and his son Sirojiddin – faced the possibility of up to three years in jail. Parents who brought their children to the Islamic religious lessons were fined.

"Legal" framework a symptom not a cause of human rights violations

Numerous articles in the Religion Law, Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offences are, as already noted, used to punish anyone exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Legal charges brought against people do not necessarily reflect what they actually did. This can lead to people being charged using laws punishing the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, when this freedom is not involved in the actions they actually carried out. It can also, as noted below, lead to accusations of violence being made against people without any credible evidence that they carried out or have any sympathy with acts of violence.

Similarly, vague definitions of the "offences" banned - such as "proselytism" or "missionary activity" - leave much room for frequently exercised arbitrary official interpretations.

Article 8 of the Religion Law contains an implicit ban on the unregistered exercise of freedom of religion and belief. It states that "a religious organisation has the status of a juridical person and can carry out its activities only after registration by the Justice Ministry or its local branches". This making of the exercise of human rights dependent on state permission is contrary to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Uzbekistan in 1995. Article 8 also states that a central agency of a religious organisation must be registered by communities "in at least eight territorial divisions of the republic of Uzbekistan (a region, the city of Tashkent or the Republic of Karakalpakstan)". The Russian Orthodox, the Baptist Union (as against unregistered Baptists), Catholics and Pentecostals are currently the only smaller religious communities with a central administration. As the majority of smaller communities have not managed to be registered in eight territorial divisions, they have no right either to exist.

Religion Law Article 9 therefore also bars communities from carrying out normal activities, for example by allowing only communities with a central administration to run a religious educational establishment, and only if they get state registration for such an establishment. "Religious educational establishments acquire the right to operate after registering with the Justice Ministry and receiving the appropriate licence," it states. "Persons teaching religious subjects at religious educational establishments must have a religious education and carry out their work with the permission of the appropriate agency of the central administration."

Fines for a wide range of manifestations of freedom of religion and belief - including activity without state permission - are generally 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage. The numbers and scale of raids and fines imposed on members of smaller religious communities may be increasing. Raids are usually accompanied by the confiscation of all religious literature officials find, while participants are often threatened or tortured.

In addition to fines, punishments under the Administrative Code for the "illegal" exercise of freedom of religion and belief can involve short-term detention of between 3 and 15 days, which is irregularly used against Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is. However, fines are a more common punishment.

Other "laws" used to prosecute people exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief include:

- Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2 punishing: "Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies". This is punishable with a fine of between 80 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, or being jailed for up to 15 days.

- Administrative Code Article 202 punishing: "Granting to the participants of gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations without state permission premises or other property (means of communication, copying and other machines, equipment, transportation), or the creation of other conditions for conducting such activity". Punishments are fines of

between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage for ordinary citizens, and between 70 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage for officials.

- Criminal Code Article 216-1, which punishes: "Inducement to participate in the operation of illegal public associations, religious organisations, movements, or sects". This carries penalties of between a fine of 25 times the monthly minimum wage and three years' Imprisonment. This Article has occasionally in the past been used against Jehovah's Witnesses.

- Administrative Code Article 194, Part 1 punishing: "Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order". Punishments are a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly wage.

- and Administrative Code Article 195 ("Resisting the orders of police officers") carries punishments of between three times the minimum monthly wage and 15 days' detention.

Although members of smaller religious communities are often fined, they are not - unlike Muslims - often jailed for long periods. One exception was a Baptist, Tohar Haydarov, who received a 10-year sentence on fabricated drug-related charges in March 2010 and was released in November 2016.

Sharing any beliefs with anyone is punishable under a variety of laws. These include:

- Article 5 of the Religion Law, which states that: "Actions aimed at attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) are forbidden, as is other missionary activity";

- Administrative Code Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") Part 2, which punishes "attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity". Punishments are fines of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, or being jailed for up to 15 days;

- Administrative Code Article 241, which punishes: "Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately". Punishments range from fines of 5 to 10 times the minimum monthly wage, or being jailed for up to 15 days.

- and Criminal Code Article 216-2, Part 2, which punishes: "Attracting believers of one faith to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity, after the application of penalties under the Code of Administrative Offences for similar activities" with punishment of a fine, community service, one to three years' restricted freedom or up to three years in prison.

Reinforcing the bans on sharing beliefs and on religious small groups, Criminal Code Article 229-2 punishes: "Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately". Punishments range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage, community service, corrective labour, restricted freedom or imprisonment for up to three years.

Criminal Code Article 216-2, Part 1 punishes "illegal religious activity, evasion of registration of a religious organisation's charter by its leaders, conducting special meetings for young people, work groups, and other circles and groups, unrelated to worship, by religious leaders and members of religious organisations." Punishments range from a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum wage, community service, between one and three years' restricted freedom, or up to three years in prison.

Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief have been prosecuted under many of the above articles, but appear to be more likely to be prosecuted under the Criminal Code. Articles not listed above also mainly used against Muslims include:

- Article 156, Part 2 ("Deliberate acts intended to humiliate ethnic honour and dignity, insult the religious or atheistic feelings of individuals, carried out with the purpose of inciting hatred, intolerance, or divisions on a national, ethnic, racial, or religious basis, as well as the explicit or implicit limitation of rights or preferences on the basis of national, racial, or ethnic origin, or religious beliefs"). This Article has also been used against members of smaller religious communities. As Protestants within Uzbekistan have noted, the state's own incitement of religious intolerance and hatred violates this part of the Criminal Code.

- Various parts of Article 159 ("Attempts to change the Constitutional order"), punishable by up to 10 years in jail. Parts of this Article penalise the use of violence, such accusations often being made against Muslims irrespective of what they did;

- Article 216 ("Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities"), punishable by up to 5 years in jail. This was one of the Articles used against Muslim Khayrullo Tursunov, extradited back to his native Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan in March 2013 against the express wishes of the UN Committee Against Torture, who was the following June given a 16-year jail sentence for the alleged "extremist" exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

- Article 242 ("Organisation of a criminal society"), punishable by up to 20 years in jail;

- and Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations"). In April 2016 the regime harshened Criminal Code Articles 244-1 (see above) and 244-2 to allow: criminal prosecutions without a previous Administrative Code prosecution; increased jail terms, including between 15 and 20 years jail for involving people under 16 in "illegal" religious organisations; a ban on "production, storage or dissemination of the ideas or symbols of religious extremist or terrorist organisations"; and increased mass media, telecommunications and internet restrictions.

These changes were soon used. In May 2016, Jonibek Turdiboyev and Mansurkhon Akhmedov were both jailed for five years under the new Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1. The only evidence brought by the prosecution consisted of statements from an existing prisoner and a claim that the authorities had found a Muslim sermon under music on an audio disc. Relatives and human rights defenders insist that the two prisoners of conscience are "guilty" only of being devout Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Administrative Code deportation possibilities for exercising freedom of religion and belief were also extended in April 2016. Taken together, the changes target Muslims exercising the freedoms of religion and belief, and of expression, and give more possibilities to prosecute non-Muslims.

Unfair trials

Trials are often conducted unfairly, and officials who violate laws supposedly defending human rights appear never to be prosecuted or punished. A typical example was the May 2016 trial of Muslim prisoners of conscience Turdiboyev and Akhmedov noted above. Human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov noted that the "witness confessions" used to convict the prisoners were obtained through torture, and the prisoners of conscience themselves insisted at the trial that they were forced to sign their own "confessions" against their will. Rustamov also noted that Tashkent Police violated legal procedures in

the investigation, but that the Prosecutor's Office and the Court ignored this. Rustamov also pointed out that:

- signatures of the police investigators in the indictment were not endorsed by a police seal, and are false;
- Turdiboyev was claimed to be initially detained on 16 November 2015, but was really detained on 12 November;
- police claimed Turdiboyev was interrogated on 26 June 2015, but on this date he was unaware of any police investigation of himself and was not questioned;
- and a signature claimed to be Turdiboyev's on a 30 January 2016 report claiming he was informed of the "expert analysis" of the CD is not Turdiboyev's signature.

"Expert analyses" are often used to secure convictions and evidence is often claimed to be fabricated by the authorities (see above).

Asked why police falsified Turdiboyev's signatures and other statements, Investigator Otabek Begmatov told Forum 18: "We did our investigation, and if you have questions you can ask the court." He then declined to talk further.

The authorities can also coerce "witnesses" into testifying against their will. In July 2017 officials forced a Russian Orthodox priest to attend what Baptists called a "show trial" (shown on state-controlled television) of Baptists being prosecuted for meeting for worship without state permission. The priest told Forum 18 "it was not my desire to attend the trial. The Judge [Azamat Khushvakhtov] called me and told me I must participate. When I tried to resist the invitation, he put pressure on me, saying that if I do not come it will not be good for the Church." Judge Khushvakhtov "asked me if we have religious freedoms and, as a representative of Christians, what we must do. I cited the Apostle Paul, saying that we need to obey the authorities, since all authority is from God. I then added that this was unless that obedience goes against our conscience and moral principles." The priest stressed that "I have nothing against the Baptists".

Two Baptists were each given five-day prison terms and three more fined. The Judge refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Prisoners of conscience

Reportedly, thousands of Muslims have been imprisoned on accusations of belonging to terrorist, extremist or banned organisations, or related to exercising freedom of religion and belief. The nature of the "justice system", in which the planting of evidence and torture is normal, makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else - knows how many of these prisoners are guilty of involvement in violence or other crime, or are only "guilty" of being devout Muslims who take their faith seriously. Indeed, Forum 18 has spoken to police who arrested people but were unaware of any offence the people arrested had committed. The only reason for such arrests was that a higher official had ordered someone to be arrested without stating why.

Uzbekistan contains violent groups which oppose the state, even though their violence is infrequent, but the authorities' own violence and injustice fuels support for such groups. When Forum 18 has asked Uzbeks who sympathise with such groups why they do so, they often indicate that their sympathy is motivated by a dislike of the regime's oppressive actions.

As well as those noted above, other Muslims known to have been jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief include Mehrinisso Hamdamova and two other women, who were arrested for holding Muslim meetings without state permission and jailed for up to seven years in April 2010. She was due to be released in November 2016 but, despite

suffering from a myoma (a tumour associated with uterine cancer), was given an additional three-year prison term. In August 2016 her sister Zulhumor who was due to be released in May 2016, had her prison term extended by three years for alleged violation of prison rules. Both sisters' health has long caused serious concern, and the authorities have denied them medical treatment.

The UN Committee Against Torture in its concluding observations on Uzbekistan's record (CAT/C/UZB/CO/4), adopted on 14 November 2013, stated: "The Committee is concerned about numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement, investigative and prison officials, or at their instigation or with their consent, often to extract confessions or information to be used in criminal proceedings".

Human rights defenders, prisoners' relatives, former prisoners, and others have told Forum 18 that the authorities: routinely ignore UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules); force prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief to publicly "renounce" their "crimes", and hold them separately and allocate them the heaviest and most dangerous work; hold prisoners in unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, which cause a high level of sickness among prisoners; torture prisoners; use criminal gangs to monitor and intimidate prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief; ban visits to prisoners by relatives without apparent reason; ban clergy visits from even the belief communities the state permits to exist; provide poor food; in at least one case apparently deliberately expose a prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis; allow doctors to seek bribes from prisoners who fall ill; deny medical treatment and medicines they need to prisoners who fall ill; sometimes misappropriate medicines which relatives are forced to buy; punish prisoners who try to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, for example by openly praying; ban prisoners from reading the Koran, Bible or other religious literature; and subject to censorship and even block letters from relatives and others.

People can also be jailed because of relatives exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Nearly three years into a 10-year prison term, Nilufar Rahimjanova died in September 2014 aged 37 in the women's labour camp near Tashkent. Relatives say the mother of four was imprisoned to punish her husband in Iran and father in Tajikistan, both Muslim theologians the Uzbek authorities dislike. Officials handed Rahimjanova's body not to her husband or father, but to her brother in Tashkent. He was told to bury it quickly in Uzbekistan without a post-mortem examination. Erkin Bobokulov, Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, did not answer Forum 18's questions.

Jail terms can be arbitrarily extended, as happened to the Hamdamova sisters. Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience Kamol Odilov was given an extra prison term in January 2016, just days before he completed his six-year prison term imposed in 2010 for exercising freedom of religion or belief. He and his fellow Muslims had met to discuss the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Prison authorities claim he got into a fight. "This is absurd – he wouldn't have fought with anyone, still less on his last day," a Muslim familiar with the case told Forum 18. In 2015 a three-year extra prison term was handed to another Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience from Bukhara, Botir Tukhtamurodov, after he too had completed a six-year prison term. Officials told Tukhtamurodov and his relatives that he will not be freed until the authorities get back his brother Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov from Russia, where he sought refuge in 2010. The Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for prisons – refused to discuss the situation of these prisoners of conscience with Forum 18.

The future?

Uzbekistan under both its unelected Presidents since independence systematically violates intertwined fundamental rights - such as freedom of religion and belief, of expression and of assembly, and to be free of torture - it has solemnly undertaken to uphold. Indeed, the interlocking nature of these human rights violations appear designed to impose total state control on all of society.

State officials repeatedly deny that human rights violations take place. Without fundamental changes in the attitudes and actions of officials - especially genuine independently verifiable implementation of the state's human rights obligations - Uzbekistan is likely to remain a place where fundamental human rights are violated with impunity.

Short prison terms, fines after "show trial"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (07.08.2017) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304 - Two Baptists were each given five-day prison terms and three more fined in Karshi to punish them for organising Sunday worship raided by police. A Russian Orthodox priest was forced to attend what Baptists call a "show trial", which was also shown on television.

Authorities in the southern Kashkadarya Region held what local Baptists complain was a "show trial" of five of their members. On 21 July Karshi [Qarshi] City Administrative Court handed down five-day prison terms to two church members and fined three others.

The two arrested men were then taken to the detention prison in handcuffs. The judge pressured a Russian Orthodox priest to attend the trial and questioned him on religious freedoms in Uzbekistan. Local television filmed the trial and later broadcast it in the region.

According to amendments to the Law on Courts, cases of administrative violations are now tried in Administrative Courts. The amendments were adopted by Parliament on 28 March, signed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on 12 April and entered into force on 1 June. Previously, administrative cases had been heard in Criminal Courts.

Armed with automatic weapons, Urganch City Police in the north-western Khorezm Region raided the worship service of local Protestants. All those present were forced onto a bus and taken to the Police Station, where the female believers were stripped to their underwear and searched. Police are believed to be preparing administrative charges against the hosts of the meeting (see below).

In the eastern city of Fergana, police with search warrants raided the homes of four local Baptists. They seized religious literature but refused to issue records of what they had seized. Administrative cases against the Baptists could be in preparation (see below).

A human rights defender from the north-western region of Karakalpakstan has complained that the authorities keep local Protestants "in constant fear", with surveillance, threats, raids, fines and short-term imprisonments. "We are pleading with international human rights organisations to raise this issue before the Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan authorities," the human rights defender told Forum 18 (see below).

Harsh controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief

Uzbekistan imposes harsh state controls on who can exercise freedom of religion or belief and where. The state bans and punishes any group or community that meets for worship without state registration. It arbitrarily denies state registration to groups it does not like.

Uzbekistan also enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. If found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Karshi: Police raid meeting for worship

On Sunday 18 June, Karshi City Police raided a meeting for worship organised by Council of Churches Baptists for about 200 deaf church members. Police officers "wrote down the names of all of them," local Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 4 August.

The Karshi City Police duty officer (who did not give his name) on 4 August as well as Shirzod Elboyev of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police on 5 August told Forum 18 that Major Firdavs Khamroyev of the Police led the case.

Major Khamroyev refused to explain why the Police raided the Baptists' worship meeting. "I don't know who you are or what you want from me," he told Forum 18. He then put the phone down.

Karshi: Two five-day prison terms, three fines

On 21 July, nearly five weeks after the raid, Karshi City Administrative Court tried five church members accused of organising the meeting for worship. The five - Viktor Tashpulatov, Mikhail Balykbayev, Jahongir Shadmonov, Svetlana Andreychenko and Munira Gaziyeva – were accused of violating Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1.

This punishes "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the unauthorised organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship" with fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or a prison term of up to 15 days.

"Some 60 people were invited to the trial, including representatives of various state organs, television channels who filmed it, and an Orthodox priest," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Fr Vladimir Skornyakov, Senior Priest of Karshi's Most Holy Mother of God Russian Orthodox Church, confirmed to Forum 18 that he had been pressured to attend the trial, which television channels had filmed.

Judge Azamat Khushvakhtov who heard the case handed down five-day prison terms to Tashpulatov and Balykbayev. The three others each received a fine of three times the minimum monthly wage, 449,325 Soms.

Judge Khushvakhtov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 4 August. He put the phone as soon as Forum 18 asked why he had punished the church members and why outsiders had been invited to the trial. Numerous subsequent calls the same day to his landline and mobile phone went unanswered.

After Judge Khushvakhtov announced the verdict, officials "demonstratively put handcuffs on us and took us to the detention prison directly from the court room", Tashpulatov told Forum 18 on 4 August.

Tashpulatov and Balykbayev served their five-day arrests and were released in the evening of 26 July.

Karshi: "Show trial"

"The whole trial was a show," Tashpulatov complained to Forum 18. "Judge Khushvakhtov asked the Russian Orthodox priest whether Christians can practice their faith in Uzbekistan, and he answered 'Yes'." The priest told the Court that "if a Church has official registration, then it can hold religious services without any problems", Tashpulatov added.

"After this the Judge turned to me and asked whether we asked any state organ for registration, and I answered, 'No'. He gave me a lecture on religious freedom in Uzbekistan and that we [Baptists] continually violate the Law. Meanwhile all the film crews were active, pointing their cameras everywhere."

Tashpulatov said that he and his fellow Baptists do not usually watch television. But neighbours told them that local Kashkadarya television showed the footage of the trial several times.

"It was not my desire to attend the trial," Fr Skorniyakov told Forum 18 from Karshi on 5 August. "The Judge called me and told me I must participate. When I tried to resist the invitation, he put pressure on me, saying that if I do not come it will not be good for the Church."

Asked what the Judge questioned him about during the trial, Fr Skorniyakov replied: "He asked me if we have religious freedoms and, as a representative of Christians, what we must do. I cited Apostle Paul, saying that we need to obey the authorities, since all authority is from God. I then added that unless that obedience goes against our conscience and moral principles."

Fr Skorniyakov did not wish to discuss the case further, but stressed: "I want you to know that I have nothing against the Baptists."

Urganch: Raid with automatic weapons on worship meeting

On 23 July, police in the city of Urganch in the north-western Khorezm Region raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship of local Protestant Christians in the home of a married couple. "Twenty five officers of law-enforcement agencies broke into the home of Ahmadjon and Yelena Nazarov and disrupted the worship service going on in their flat," Protestant Christians from Urganch, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 4 August. "Some of the officers carried automatic weapons. Only six of the officers were in police uniform."

Leading the raid was Shukhrat Kurbanov, Deputy Chief of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police of Khorezm Region. Accompanying him were Urganch City Police officers Sardorbek Allabergenov, Yusupboy Yusupov, Mukhammad Rakhimov, Odylbek Matyakubov, Bakhtiyor Bekchanov, Bakhtiyor Karimov and Khursand Samandarov.

City Police Officer Allabergenov refused to explain why the Police raided the worship meeting. "I do not understand your question," he claimed to Forum 18 on 4 August. "I have no time to talk to you." He then put the phone down.

Participating in the worship were some 20 adults and 7 children. Police wrote down names and details of each person present. Officers also carried out an unauthorised search in the home, the Protestants complained. They confiscated a Children's Bible, a personal notebook with notes, sheets of paper with Christian songs, and three mobile phones. The officers then "forced all the worshippers onto a bus" and took them to Urganch City Police Station.

Urganch: Strip searches, pressure to write statements

In the Police Station the Protestants were "forced to sit on the floor." Police officers "with the help of female Officer Salomat Atajanova undressed sisters [female Church members] down to their underwear," they complained. "Officer Atajanova then seized a mobile phone with Christian sermons on it, found on one of the sisters."

Officers "forced nine of the believers to write statements but the rest refused to do so." They told the Protestants that the confiscated items will be sent for religious "expert analysis" to the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Police are believed to be preparing administrative charges against the Nazarov couple.

Chief of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police, Gayrat Khudayberganov, defended the raid. "It has nothing to do with their religion," he told Forum 18 on 4 August. "They held an unauthorised meeting." Told that it was a religious meeting, and asked why participants had been taken to the Police Station and some of them subjected to strip searches, he responded: "I did not know about this. I will make an inquiry about this to my Deputy Shukhrat."

Khudayberganov then without giving details told Forum 18 that Police opened an administrative case, and "next week the Court will hear the case. It will properly evaluate what happened." He said that he "cannot discuss the case further until after the trial".

Fergana: Simultaneous raids, confiscations

In the eastern Fergana Region on 1 July, Police raided the homes of four members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the city of Fergana, local Baptists complained to Forum 18. Police conducted simultaneous early-morning searches at four addresses. Armed with search warrants, officers raided the homes of Pastor Aleksei Beryalev, Boris Kuznetsov, Sergei Stanislavsky and Yevgeniya Fedina.

Officers seized 41 Christian books and 48 magazines, 6 Bibles, a notebook computer and other items from the four Baptists. Officers refused to give the Baptists copies of police records of the confiscations.

Baptists told Forum 18 that as of 4 August the authorities neither returned the confiscated items nor informed them of whether or not any case was opened against them.

Karakalpakstan: Protestants "in constant fear"

The authorities in the north-western Region of Karakalpakstan "suppress Protestant Christians and keep them in constant fear", a human rights defender from the region, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 4 August. "There are no registered Protestant Churches in Karakalpakstan, and the last one was recently stripped of official registration."

The authorities have refused state registration (and therefore the right to exist) to all religious communities in Karakalpakstan except mosques of the state-backed Muslim

Board and one Russian Orthodox parish. Officers frequently raid and punish local Protestants (see F18News 17 May 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2280).

Protestants exist in Karakalpakstan, the human rights defender noted. "They live and work there. They cannot just disappear. They have faith in their religion, and want to practice it. The authorities are closely monitoring the believers' every move. They are afraid not only to meet for worship but also to do anything religious, because it could be interpreted by the authorities as illegal religious activity and result in their punishment."

The human rights defender pointed to the 15-day administrative arrests handed down in Nukus on 20 April to Atamurat Tajimuratov, Salamat Biskeyev, Joldasbai Zhanabergenov and Marat Mambetaliyev, four Protestant men from a local Church, to punish them for meeting for worship in a home (see F18News 20 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2288).

In addition to the 15-day prison terms, Judge Sailaubai Mambetkadyrov of Nukus City Criminal Court also handed down huge fines to five other Church members, the human rights defender added. Yerkin Tansykbayev, Zhamila Tajibayeva, Barshyn Bazarbayeva, Zamira Utemuratova, Sarbinaz Kaypbayeva, each received a fine of 40 times the minimum monthly wage, 5,991,000 Soms.

All nine were punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2. This punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and items used to manufacture or distribute them.

In addition, the four men imprisoned for 15 days were also punished under Administrative Code Article 241. This punishes "Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately".

"We are pleading with international human rights organisations to raise this issue before the Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan authorities," the human rights defender told Forum 18.

Asked about the case, Nukus Court's Chancellery official (who did not give his name) referred Forum 18 to Judge Mambetkadyrov. The Judge greeted Forum 18 at first, but when asked about the imprisonments and fines he had handed down claimed it was a wrong number. Subsequent calls to his number the same day went unanswered.

Telephones at Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department went unanswered on 4 August.

'Longest seven minutes of my life': Uzbek beaten up for leading secret church

World Watch Monitor (12.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2t4Ft4E> - Azamat became a Christian in the early days of Uzbekistan's independence, soon after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, when, he says, the country "was a much freer place than it is now".

He embraced his new faith, setting up a network of house churches, and finding teachers for Sunday schools. But the state soon noticed, and its interest led to an abduction that he describes as “the longest seven minutes of my life”.

Azamat, now in his 40s with a wife and two children, talks about how the heady days of his new-found faith turned into a long-running battle to keep the church running under severe oppression from the Uzbek authorities.

“I was born a Muslim, but I had some Christian friends. They had converted to Christianity. At first, they had been like me, drank and smoked, but they changed.

Warned off joining the Christian 'sect'

“They invited me to a Christmas party; I was curious and decided to go. My parents warned me ‘not to join their sect’.”

Azamat didn’t know what to expect. At the party there were children and adults from very different backgrounds – Russians, Germans and a few Uzbeks. They sang Christmas songs and recited poems.

In the early days, “after communism,” Uzbekistan was a much freer place. Today, other nationalities are still allowed to openly practise their Christian faith, but Uzbeks visiting such parties would be in danger. Uzbek Christians run a high risk of being [jailed for their faith](#), and their [persecution was predicted to become “even worse” under the country’s new leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev](#).

People prayed for Azamat at the party and, although he soon wanted to know more about Christianity, he wouldn’t read a Bible. “I was a Muslim after all. So instead I learned more about the Muslim prayers.”

Soon after the Christmas party Azamat became sick with terrible pains in his stomach. He went to a New Year’s party where Christians prayed he would be healed, but it appeared to make no difference.

“I went to the doctor the day after for tests. I visited a week later expecting his diagnosis, but instead he told me I was healthy and accused me of wanting an excuse to not work!” he says.

Azamat went home. Not knowing what to do next, he decided to pray, making a commitment to Christianity. That night his stomach pains went.

The first few months, he hid his Bible and said nothing about his faith to his parents. But his life changed, he says, when he was robbed on the way home from a Christian conference.

“I had to tell my parents where I had been and what had happened. They were unhappy to say the least, and the word about my faith quickly spread.

Swore at on the street

"Even my parents were harassed for my faith. People swore at us on the street. Sometimes people would throw rocks at our house. Once, an old lady – a friend of my grandmother – knocked loudly on our door and just screamed. My mother was upset and asked her to come inside. The lady kept yelling, 'how could you let your son become a *kafir*?' My mother was angry and defended me.

"Unfortunately the lady died a few years later, but her son, daughter and two grandsons are now members of our church."

Azamat joined his friends' church, but the congregation shrank when the Germans decided to move back home. "It was just three old ladies, seven teenagers and myself."

Three students who used to belong to the church went to a Bible school, and Azamat hoped that one would return to lead the church. But someone in the church told Azamat that *he* should lead, despite his lack of theological training. He accepted the role, and the church grew to more than 100 people.

The Uzbek authorities noticed the membership growth. Police and security officials raided the church when Azamat wasn't there. Members were forced to write statements about who they were and why they were there before being let go.

Police harassment

The next day Azamat went to the police station to find out what had happened. An assistant to the chief of police told him: "I've closed thirteen mosques already. I will close your church too."

He was then summoned to the station daily: "They held me responsible and told me that someone needed to be punished," he said.

Police tried to force him to write a statement about the church and why the members met.

"I knew it was a trap and the police would use it against me in court, so I refused. The questioning often went on from two until 10pm. They wanted to know how often we met, how big our meetings were, and what we discussed. They threatened to put me in jail for 15 days. In the end, I wasn't sent to prison, but our church registration was withdrawn. This meant that our church was officially closed."

Azamat and the other church leaders decided to meet in small groups in homes instead. But, he feels, the security officials hadn't forgotten how stubborn he had been during their questioning.

Not long after the official closure of the church, he was walking home when a black car stopped. He expected the driver just wanted directions. Instead, the back door swung open and he was quickly pushed inside.

He was paralyzed with fear, but just managed to ask where he was being taken.

His abductors didn't reply, and drove on for half a kilometer. They stopped and he was dragged out of the car onto a deserted street where he was beaten.

"We know everything!" they yelled. "You didn't understand. You need to stop with your ministry. Think about your wife and children. Something much worse will happen."

While talking about the ordeal, Azamat put his arms around his head to show how he tried to protect himself. "I couldn't talk to them. It hurt so much. I felt so much fear and hatred. They beat and kicked me for seven minutes. Seven minutes only, but they were the longest seven minutes of my life. Then they left. I picked myself up and walked home."

When he got home, there was nobody there. He sat on the grass and broke down in tears. "It was an explosion of emotions. I couldn't control myself. That month, ever since the police had raided the church service, had been so stressful. And now this happened. When my wife and children came home, I didn't tell them anything. I still haven't told my wife about what happened that day. I don't want her to panic. I only shared my story with a handful of leaders in our church," he says.

Church goes underground

After what happened to Azamat, some leaders were so scared that they left the church. He offered to leave the country to take the pressure off, but others wanted him to stay during the transition from a legal church to an underground church.

Azamat decided to stay – if he'd sought refuge in another country it would have meant telling his wife about the beating, which he wasn't ready to do.

When Azamat's church closed he decided to start up special house groups for children, teenagers and youth, even though teaching religion to children in Uzbekistan is forbidden.

"Not even registered churches are allowed to have a Sunday school. They can have classes for children, where they can watch cartoons or do crafts but nothing religious," he says.

Children are under further pressure at school.

"Teachers will ask if their parents read from the Quran or the Bible, if they pray at home and how, and if they go to the mosque or a church," Azamat says.

"If anything points towards Christianity, the children are encouraged to report their parents to the authorities. So we have to teach our children ourselves both about Jesus, and about security. What do you say and what don't you say? My own teenage daughter doesn't even know that I am a pastor. I can't burden her with that information yet."

Azamat continues his 'underground' work in poor health. He has constant headaches and needs surgery on his nose because he can't breathe properly, he says.

He feels his health issues are related to the stress, and sometimes feels he can't go on.

"The last time I was questioned by the police, I thought I should just give up. I wanted to sign a paper that said I wouldn't serve as a pastor anymore. But I didn't give up."

[Uzbekistan](#) regards Christianity as alien and destabilising: its authorities closely monitor religious groups. The country was ranked 16th on the [Open Doors 2017 World Watch List](#) of countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Muslims' long prison terms, Protestants' short terms

A Tashkent court jailed eleven Muslims who met to pray and discuss their faith for up to six years. Several testified about torture (including officers' threat to rape the wife of one in front of him). The court ignored the testimony. Three Protestants were given 15-day terms.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rWRCUR> - A court in the Uzbek capital Tashkent handed down prison sentences of five to six years on 26 May to eleven Muslim men for meeting in homes and teahouses to discuss their faith. The men met for joint prayers between 2008 and 2016, but the only time when all eleven met together was in spring 2008.

One of the eleven, Khusnuddin Rizayev, a 39-year old professor of Tashkent's State Pedagogical University, had already been sentenced in a separate case on 25 January. That sentence has been combined with the sentence handed down on 26 May.

"All the defendants appealed against the verdict on 15 June," Shohida Inagamova, mother of one of the defendants, Khusnuddin Inagamov, told Forum 18. "The appeal will be heard on 30 June at Tashkent City Court." However, Rizayev's lawyer Dilmurod Akhmedov told Forum 18 he has not been informed of any date for the appeal hearing.

The eleven men are all being held in the Interior Ministry's Detention Centre No. 1 in Tashkent.

The authorities claim that in a 2008 meeting, some of the men spoke against then President Islam Karimov, talked about the need to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Uzbekistan, and planned to overthrow the government. They also accused them of supporting a banned radical Islamic movement and of listening to recorded sermons of an Imam the authorities "disappeared" 22 years ago.

However, Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights defender, dismissed these accusations. "The defendants only ate, rested, and prayed together," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 15 June. He complained that the case is "fabricated, and the authorities produced no evidence except the confessions extracted from the defendants by torturing them during the investigation."

Relatives complain that the Court refused to hear the defendants' testimony of torture in detention, including threats that officers would rape the wife of one of the prisoners in front of him.

Officials of various state agencies involved in imprisoning the eleven men, including the Anti-Terrorism Police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Prosecutor General's and Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office, and Judge Iroda Mukhamedova of the Tashkent Court, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 between 15 and 16 June.

In late April, the authorities in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region gave short prison terms to three Protestant men.

Lengthy prison terms for praying together and discussing religion

Judge Iroda Mukhamedova of Tashkent City Criminal Court on 26 May gave lengthy prison terms to eleven Muslim men, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. They will serve the sentences in ordinary regime labour camps. The months each spent in pre-trial detention will count towards their sentence. Tashkent's Mirobod District Prosecutor Alisher Karimov was the State Prosecutor in the case.

The defendants were deemed guilty for listening while they worked together to CDs of Imam Mirzayev's sermons, which the authorities deem "extremist". The prosecution claimed the sermons contained calls to "establish Islamic religious rules" in Uzbekistan.

The eleven Muslims Judge Mukhamedova sentenced (full name, date of birth, Criminal Code Articles, term of imprisonment, date sentence is counted from):

1. Davron Yuldashevich Fayziyev; born 20 October 1977; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
2. Latip Talipovich Yusupov; born 22 December 1970; Criminal Code Articles 159, Part 3, Point a; 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 1 October 2016).
3. Khusnuddin Tokhtamurodovich Rizayev; born 9 December 1977; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 25 August 2016).
4. Dilshod Khikmatullayevich Kamilov; born 9 July 1975; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
5. Abdurashid Abdulkhayevich Rashidov; born 16 October 1972; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
6. Khusnuddin Abdukhakimovich Inagamov; born 24 March 1973; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
7. Afzaljon Azatovich Urunov; born 26 March 1973; Criminal Code Articles Article 159, Part 1; 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 and a half years' imprisonment (counted from 13 October 2016).
8. Ravshan Mukhamadovich Mirzayev; born 2 May 1969; Criminal Code Articles 159, Part 1; 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 and a half years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
9. Sobirjon Sotvoldiyevich Khasanov; born 25 November 1970; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
10. Bakhadyr Bakhtiyarovich Sadykov; born 18 October 1971; Criminal Code Articles 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 13 October 2016).
11. Ravshan Bakhtiyarovich Sadykov (Bakhadyr Sadykov's young brother); born 24 September 1976; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).

The NSS secret police charged the defendants under Criminal Code Articles 159 (offence against the Constitutional order), 244-1 (production, storage, distribution or

demonstration of religious extremist materials containing threat to public security and public order) and 244-2 (creation of, leadership, participation in extremist religious, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organisations).

Part 1 of Article 159 (public calls or dissemination of materials containing such calls for illegal change of the State order) carries punishments including a fine up to 600 times the minimum monthly wage, or deprivation of liberty of between two and five years, or imprisonment of up to five years.

Part 2 of Article 159 (violent acts aimed at impediment of the activity of State organs) carries punishments including a fine of 200 to 600 times the minimum monthly wage, or deprivation of liberty between three and five years or imprisonment from three to five years.

Point (a) of Part 3 of Article 159 (acts punishable under Part 1 or Part 2 of Article 159 committed repeatedly or by a dangerous recidivist) carries punishments of imprisonment for between five and ten years.

Part 2 of Article 244-1 carries punishments including a fine of 300 to 400 times the minimum monthly wage, or arrest for up to six months, or limitation of liberty of between three and five years, or deprivation of liberty of between three and five years.

Part 1 of Article 244-2 carries punishments of deprivation of liberty of between five and fifteen years.

Part 2 of Article 241 (failure to report about or concealment of serious crimes) carries punishments including a fine up to 75 times the minimum monthly wage, or correctional labour of up to three years, or deprivation of liberty of between two and five years or imprisonment of up to five years.

The former NSS secret police officer Azimjon Urunov faced charges under Criminal Code Article 241, Part 2 (failure to report about or concealment of serious crimes). However, charges against him were dropped on 23 May during the penultimate hearing of the trial and he was freed from pre-trial detention. The Court questioned him as a witness in the case.

For Rizayev, this was the second sentence in 2017. He was among a group of four men who went on trial under Judge Davron Norboyev at Tashkent City Criminal Court on 12 December 2016. On 25 January 2017, the Judge sentenced Rizayev to five and a half years' imprisonment, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. He was convicted under Criminal Code Article 216 (illegal organisation of public or religious organisations) and Article 241. The May trial consolidated the two sentences into one.

First Judge removed

The initial trial of the eleven Muslims began on 27 February under Judge Azim Khudoyberganov. After complaints from the lawyers and defendants that the Judge "was drunk during the hearing and violated procedure", he was removed from the case, Ikramov told Forum 18.

After the appointment of Judge Mukhamedova, the trial was completed in three short hearings, each one lasting between two and three hours. "The Court rushed to carry out the orders from the executive authorities," Ikramov complained.

No answers

The official who answered Judge Mukhamedova's phone on 15 June confirmed her name to Forum 18 but when asked about the case, claimed she was not Mukhamedova. She asked Forum 18 to call back later and then put the phone down. Officials between 15 and 16 June kept telling Forum 18 that the Judge was busy, and asked to call back later.

Phones at the headquarters in Tashkent of the NSS secret police went unanswered between 15 and 16 June.

Botyr Kudratkhojayev headed Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office in 2016 and signed the indictment against the eleven Muslims. On 7 June 2017 he was appointed Uzbekistan's Deputy Prosecutor General. Reached on 16 June, Kudratkhojayev refused to talk to Forum 18. He put the phone down when asked about the case. Subsequent calls on 16 June to the Prosecutor General's phones went unanswered.

NSS Investigator Major Sh. Markayev had prepared the indictment, which was then endorsed by the Chief of the NSS Investigation Department Colonel Oleg Busygin.

Alisher Maksudov, Chief Assistant of the Prosecutor of Tashkent City, declined to discuss the case. "We cannot inform you about the case over the phone. Please, send your questions in writing," he told Forum 18 on 16 June. However, he claimed that the defendants had not been tortured. "I know the case, and nothing of the sort happened."

Asked about the case on 16 June, Tashkent City Police officials (no names were given) referred Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Mukhammad from the Anti-Terror Police, who investigated the case. They did not give his last name.

Officer Mukhammad identified himself to Forum 18 on 16 June. But when asked about the case and why he and his colleagues tortured Rizayev while interrogating, he replied, "I do not understand your questions," and put the phone down. Called back he claimed to Forum 18 that it is a "wrong number".

Arrests, searches

As seen from the indictment, the eleven Muslims worked in groups of between four and six renovating flats in Tashkent and elsewhere in Uzbekistan between 2008 and 2016. They also met separately in homes and teahouses to pray together and discuss religion.

The NSS secret police accused the eleven of being members of the Muslim radical movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, disseminating its extremist ideas and plotting to overthrow the government.

Khusnuddin Rizayev - a professor of Tashkent State Pedagogical University - was arrested and put in pre-trial detention on 8 August 2016. The other ten Muslims were arrested in October and November 2016.

In autumn 2016 officers searched the flats of Mirzayev and Fayziyev, according to the indictment seen by Forum 18. They seized from the two a computer hard disc and DVDs containing religious materials. The indictment claims that the materials contained teachings of the Hizb ut-Tahrir radical Muslim movement.

Officials accused Mirzayev of "making efforts to organise a Muslim religious community to spread his religious beliefs which he learned from Andijan Imam Abduvali Mirzayev."

Abduvali Mirzayev, an Imam in Andijan, "disappeared" at Tashkent Airport in 1995 with his assistant and was never seen again. Many Muslims have since been punished for having recordings of his sermons.

Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18 that the authorities also searched the family home and seized his son's books and computer. "They found nothing illegal."

Why were Muslims arrested?

Tashkent City Anti-Terror Police initially opened the case on 5 August 2016 against Abdugofur Usmonov, according to the indictment. Uzbekistan's Prosecutor General handed the case on 13 October 2016 to the NSS secret police for further investigation.

Usmonov had been arrested in February 2016, Khusnuddin Rizayev's father, Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18 on 15 June. Using Usmonov's statements, police arrested Khusnuddin Rizayev on 8 August. Usmonov admitted to Police that he "spoke against the government and shared his complaints with my son," Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18.

In early 2016, prior to Usmonov's arrest, Usmonov and Khusnuddin Rizayev worked together renovating a flat. As well as teaching drawing and graphic arts at Tashkent State Pedagogical University, Rizayev also worked for clients on interior design of flats.

"Soon after the conversation, my son warned [Usmonov's] father about his statements, and told him to stop his son from making such statements," Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18. He lamented that the Court did "not take this into account and argued that he should have informed the Police but did not do so."

Azimjon Urunov, a former NSS officer (and brother of one of those convicted, Afzaljon Urunov), was accused of knowing about the alleged activities of the group and not reporting to the authorities. The eleven men had gathered in Urunov's summer house in Tashkent Region's Zangiota District in the spring of 2008.

"It is no surprise to me that a former NSS man was involved in the group," Tashkent-based human rights defender Ikramov complained to Forum 18. "Only he of the twelve was released."

"Nothing illegal in their activity"

Tokhtamurod Rizayev defended his son, saying that he is a Muslim believer but was "not involved in religious propaganda and did not give religious literature to others." He lamented that his son was "supposed to receive his Doctor of Science degree in 2016 but alas could not."

Khusnuddin Rizayev's lawyer Akhmedov explained to Forum 18 that "since 2008 they [the eleven men] had regular gatherings for prayers but Rizayev met with them on one or two occasions." He was adamant that the defendants did "not commit anything criminal and there is no evidence of anything criminal in their activity."

Rizayev actively shared his Muslim beliefs on social media

Khusnuddin Rizayev – who is married with three children – actively shared his Islamic beliefs on his Facebook account. As seen by Forum 18, he wrote on the importance for Muslims of reading the Koran, saying namaz prayers, being righteous, being good towards others, being kind, not avenging evil, not being jealous and not being lovers of high positions in society.

Rizayev also shared that Muslims should be kind toward strangers, refugees, orphans, the needy, poor and hungry especially during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. He maintained one should not be preoccupied with one's own table of food when breaking the fast.

Yasin Ismadiyarov, Dean of the School of Professional Education of Tashkent State Pedagogical University, told Forum 18 on 15 June that Rizayev "worked in a different faculty until the summer of 2016 when their faculty was subordinated to us." He explained that "I do not know him well but I did not hear bad reports about him from his colleagues."

Nurlan Tashimov, Head of the Department of Drawing and Graphic Arts where Rizayev worked, told Forum 18 on 15 June that he and his colleagues were "shocked when they heard that Khusnuddin was arrested." He described Rizayev as a "good and responsible man who always fulfilled his duties on time". He added that "He never shared any radical ideas with us. We are still confused and shocked about this arrest."

Tashimov told Forum 18 that neither he nor his colleagues participated in the trial. But at the request of Rizayev's father his Department provided the Court with a positive reference letter.

Khusnuddin Rizayev's father lamented to Forum 18 that the authorities "made my son criminally responsible for no crimes he committed." He said that "His only guilt was that nine years ago in 2008 ago he visited Urunov's summerhouse where they swam in the pool, ate and prayed together."

Previously convicted of Hizb ut-Tahrir membership

As seen from the indictment, Yusupov, Inagamov, Rashidov, Kamilov and Fayziyev were convicted in the early 2000s for allegedly being members of the banned radical religious movement Hizb ut-Tahrir. They were all released between 2004 and 2007. Inagamov, sentenced to nine years in prison for alleged extremist religious activity in 2001, was pardoned and released in 2004.

Inagamov's mother, Shohida Inagamova, told Forum 18 on 15 June that "I cannot say anything about his imprisonment in 2001, but this time he was arrested for no reason." She was adamant that her son is "innocent, and has committed no crime, nor even planned anything against the government."

She explained that Inagamov's lawyer asked the Court "what exactly crimes my son committed but the Court ignored it."

"All these years after he was released from prison in 2004, he did not even attend mosque for fear of the authorities," she lamented. "My son's only guilt is that he continued his namaz prayers."

Court refused to investigate torture and violated procedures

Inagamova complained to Forum 18 the Court did "not investigate the torture of my son and others by the Police and secret police to make them confess they were guilty."

Both Police and NSS secret police officers during the investigation "subjected each defendant to severe torture to make them confess they were guilty", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18. He recounted that during the hearing Rizayev told the Court that "Anti-terror Police Investigators Otabek and Mukhammad (last names not known) beat him up and threatened him that unless he confesses his guilt they will bring his wife and rape her in front of him."

Rizayev lost consciousness while telling this to the Court, Ikramov added. An ambulance was called, and the Court adjourned for thirty minutes. After the Court hearing resumed, Judge Mukhamedova and Prosecutor Karimov did "not react at all to the facts of torture".

Ikramov expressed to Forum 18 that "Perhaps they live in the dark ages, and according to their mentality this is all normal."

The Court also ignored the testimony of Ravshan Sadykov, one of the defendants, about his torture during the investigation, Ikramov added. "Police choked him by putting a plastic bag over his head, and electrocuted him in his earlobes to make him confess he was guilty."

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine", the United Nations Committee Against Torture found in 2007.

Ikramov added that the Court also did "not hear the six witnesses who were supposed to give testimonies of the defendants' innocence."

Three Protestants given short prison terms

Meanwhile in late April, the authorities in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region gave short prison terms to three Protestant men – Marat, Joldas and Salamat (last names not given). A court in Nukus, Karakalpakstan's regional capital, handed down the 15-day administrative prison terms to punish them for meeting for worship in a home.

The three Protestants were freed from custody ahead of time on 5 May, Protestants from Nukus, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in mid-May. The men were "starved" while in NSS secret police custody, independent news agency centre1.com reported on 28 April, based on sources from Nukus.

"There is a wider persecution [of Protestant Christians] going on in Karakalpakstan now," Protestants told Forum 18. "Many believers were dismissed from their jobs." Because of the fear of the authorities, they did not want to discuss with Forum 18 the jailings or other cases.

The authorities have refused state registration (and therefore the right to exist) to all religious communities in Karakalpakstan except mosques of the state-backed Muslim Board and one Russian Orthodox parish. Officers frequently raid and punish local Protestants.

Deportation, fines, Bible and Koran seizures

A Russian was deported with no court decision and home-owner fined after police raided a Tashkent Christian meeting. Officials told a Muslim seeking back her seized Koran manuscript that police cannot be prosecuted. Tashkent Airport customs seized pilgrims' Korans. A court ordered New Testament texts destroyed.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (17.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rqMVC0> - In early April, a Russian Protestant was deported back to Russia with no court decision to punish her for attending a Christian meeting in a flat in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. Police raided the meeting, seizing Christian books and other items, possibly with information from an informer. The home-owner was fined.

Police officers and customs officials frequently seize individuals' religious literature, claiming it is "illegal".

A Muslim woman in Kokand is still campaigning to get back a valuable centuries-old Koran manuscript seized from her in 2006 which Court Bailiffs claim was "lost" after being stored in a safe. Officials told her the Police Investigator who originally confiscated the "lost" manuscript cannot now be brought to trial.

In Navoi in April, police raided a Christian family, seizing religious literature and other items. One officer told the home owner she may be fined.

In Urgench, police search the bags of a local Christian at the market, seizing a copy of a booklet with three New Testament letters. In late March a judge fined her and ordered the New Testament booklet destroyed.

In Nukus in March, a Judge fined a local Protestant for having Christian materials in his home when police raided it. He ordered the book and discs confiscated.

At Tashkent Airport in January, customs officers seized Korans and other Muslim literature from pilgrims returning from Mecca.

On the land border with Turkmenistan in May, customs officers stopped two visitors from Turkmenistan from leaving Uzbekistan after they discovered Christian materials – including the Bible – in their mobile phones. The two women were fined and then had difficulty leaving the country as their Uzbek visas had by then expired.

Tashkent: Raid

On 24 March seven officials, including three uniformed police officers, broke into the home of Yelena Potorochina, a Protestant in Tashkent's Yakkasaray District, Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 18 April. At the flat five Protestant women were meeting to discuss the Christian faith, led by a Russian citizen Tatyana Bezhenova. Potorochina's son was also in the flat during the raid.

The officials included the Head of Yakkasaray District Anti-Terrorism Police Azamat Nabirayev, and Yakkasary District Police Major Ramiz Fozilov with Police Inspectors Toirzhon Pakhrudinov and Zhamoliddin Karshibayev. They searched Potorochina's home and confiscated four Christian books including two New Testaments, 12 notebooks with personal notes written by the participants, a laptop computer, a desktop computer's hard disc, and a digital camera.

Raids on private homes to search for religious literature of all beliefs (including Muslim, Christian, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna texts) are common in Uzbekistan. Any printed or electronic literature found is confiscated and those who possess the texts punished.

The officials also confiscated Bezhenova's Russian passport. On 30 March Bezhenova left written complaints at the Presidential Administration and Yakkasaray District Prosecutor's Office. When she also visited the Russian Embassy officials refused to help her and advised her to hire a lawyer.

Yakkasaray District Police Inspector Karshibayev did not want to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 11 May, and referred the inquiry to District Anti-Terrorism Police Head Nabirayev. Asked why police raided Potorochina's home and confiscated private property, he claimed to Forum 18 that "everything was returned to her".

Told that the Court ordered the computer to be destroyed, Inspector Karshibayev replied: "I am not going to discuss the case with you. You can send questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Fine, Russian deported

On 3 April Judge Timur Kasymov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court on 3 April found Potorochina guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 ("Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the unauthorised organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship"). He fined her 7,488,750 Soms, or 50 times the minimum monthly wage. He also ordered the destruction of Potorochina's laptop computer.

However, on 17 April Tashkent City Appeal Court reduced Potorochina's fine to 748,875 Soms or five times the minimum monthly wage.

On 4 April the authorities deported Bezhenova back to Russia, but without a legally-required court order. She also received her passport back that day.

Asked on 12 May why he fined her and ordered her computer to be destroyed, when her "offence" was to exercise her freedom of religion and belief stated in the Constitution, Judge Kasymov told Forum 18: "I cannot discuss my decisions with third parties". He did not answer when Forum 18 asked why Bezhenova was deported without the legally-required court order.

Tashkent: Informer?

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that they suspect that a woman who attends their meetings for worship may be an informer for the authorities. They note that she was the last to enter the flat, left the door unlocked "against security measures", and hung a towel from the window of the flat before the raid. "We think that the towel may have been a sign to the authorities that we were having a teaching session," Protestants stated.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police carries out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during meetings for worship, and the recruitment of spies within communities – including among leaders.

Kokand: Centuries-old Koran confiscated by police – sold abroad?

In 2006 police in Kokand [Qo'qon] in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Region raided the home of a Muslim woman, Rahbarkhon Adylova. Officers confiscated a centuries-old Koran manuscript that is thought to be worth an extremely large sum of money. It has been in her family for many generations, and in Soviet times she was approached several times to sell the Koran for an extremely high price. She refused all these approaches.

On 23 June 2006 Judge P. Mamatusmonov of Kokand Criminal Court ordered the Koran manuscript to be returned to Adylova. (Forum 18 has seen the Judge's decision.) Yet when Adylova went to reclaim her Koran, Court Bailiffs told her that it had allegedly been "lost" from the safe where it had been stored.

Adylova told Forum 18 on 16 May 2017 that when she realised the Koran was "stolen from the safe after the Court decision in 2006", she complained for several years to

various authorities with no success. In early 2017 she complained to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev via his website and started a one-person picket in front of the Presidential Administration's building in Tashkent.

Adylova said that an official from the office of Presidential Advisor Tursunkhan Khudaybergenov then called her, saying that he would meet her on 26 April. Khudaybergenov was in 2006 the Head of Fergana Regional Police when the Koran was confiscated. When Adylova complained to Khudaybergenov about this in 2006, she said that he publicly claimed that she was "trying to blackmail" his officials.

Adylova and her daughter were met on 26 April 2017 not by Khudaybergenov, but by officials of Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Administration. "I don't remember the name of the official, but he told us that they will see what they can do but did not promise anything," Adylova stated.

Presidential Administration officials who would not give their names refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Advisor Khudaybergenov on 12 May. One official claimed that "we cannot give you any information. You can send a letter to the Foreign Ministry".

Human rights defenders and others have told Adylova that the Koran "may have been sold abroad", and that "it is unlikely that she will be able to recover it", independent news agency centre1.com reported on 28 April.

Kokand: Impunity for police

After Adylova's 26 April meeting in Tashkent, Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the then in 2006 Police Investigator Alisher Khuzhamkulov. He had confiscated the Koran from Adylova.

However, the Prosecutor's Office did "not invite me to record my testimony or to attend the court hearing," Adylova told Forum 18. Fergana Regional Prosecutor Muzaffar Abdurakhmanov then informed her in writing that Investigator Khuzhamkulov had been amnestied, because the time period for criminal liability had expired.

Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office officials, who would not give their names, refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Regional Prosecutor Abdurakhmanov on 12 May.

"The authorities incriminate people many years after events for a stolen mobile phone, but for a valuable Koran they give themselves the excuse of the expiry of the term of criminal liability," Adylova complained. "The authorities have promised many times that they will help find the book and return it to us, but up until now nothing has been done."

There is within Uzbekistan a culture of impunity for officials carrying out unjust and oppressive actions.

Navoi: Raid and confiscations

On 6 April three police officers and two other officials in Navoi [Nawoiy] in the central Navoi Region raided the home of Alla Dobronravova, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church. Two of the police officers were Mirkomil Usmonov of Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Kamil Yakubov of Navoi City Police. Police also brought with them the Chair and one employee of the local mahalla committee (local residential administration) as witnesses of the search and confiscation.

Mahalla committees are a key part of the state's structures of repression.

The five officials arrived at 6 pm and claimed they were carrying out a "passport check". Those within the flat during the raid were Dobronravova, Olga Tsirkunyak (her daughter), and Ivan Tsirkunyak (her daughter's husband). The police presented a search warrant from Navoi City Prosecutor written in Uzbek, which no-one present understood.

Police confiscated Christian materials, including five books, two songbooks, two DVD discs, and two personal notebooks with notes, Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 April. Police told the family that these items will be sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for "expert analysis".

Such allegedly "expert analysis" is often used to justify violations of freedom of religion and belief.

Officers also told Dobronravova that she may be punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and any items used to manufacture or distribute them.

Asked about the case, Navoi Regional Police on 12 May told Forum 18 that CID Officer Usmonov was "not available" and referred it to Captain Abdumalik Sadikov from the CID, who also oversees cases repressing freedom of religion and belief. Sadikov admitted that officers had raided Dobronravova's home and confiscated books and other items, but refused to comment. He asked Forum 18 to talk to Officer Usmonov.

Usmonov on 12 May at first admitted who he was, but when Forum 18 asked about the case he claimed it was "a wrong number". He then put the phone down.

Urgench: Market arrest, confiscation, fine, destruction

On 18 February police in Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region, including Police Inspectors Nizomboi Khudoyorov and Ulugbek Ruzmetov, stopped Dilorom Khudoybergenova at the town's open-air market. The officials brought her to the Police Station within the market, and searched her bags full of groceries. As well as the groceries, the police found a book containing the three short New Testament texts the First, Second, and Third Letters of John with commentaries in Uzbek.

Khudoybergenova was then taken to Urgench City Police Station, where she was questioned by CID Major Shavkat Bekjanov. He wrote a report of the incident, and confiscated the book containing the First, Second and Third Letters of John, as well as Khudoybergenova's mobile phone.

When Khudoybergenova objected to this and told Major Bekjanov that she will write to the President, Bekjanov "began shouting at her and warned her that he will open a criminal case if she complains". Having been arrested at 5 pm, Khudoybergenova was kept at the Police Station until 9 pm before being released.

Major Bekjanov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 12 May. Asked why police stopped Khudoybergenova when she was shopping and confiscated the Christian book from her, and why he threatened her with a criminal case, he replied: "I do not understand your questions." He then put the phone down.

On 28 March Judge Alisher Kahharov of Urgench City Criminal Court fined Khudoybergenova 14,977,500 Soms, or 100 times the minimum monthly wage. She was convicted under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import

into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

The Judge also ordered the destruction of the Biblical book of the three letters of John, and the confiscation of Khudoybergenova's mobile phone. Religious literature – including the Bible and Islamic texts – is often ordered to be confiscated and destroyed.

Azamat Khaytboyev, Judge Kahharov's Assistant, claimed to Forum 18 the Judge is "in a seminar", and referred Forum 18 to Judge Alisher Avetov, "who can answer your questions". But numerous calls to Avetov's phone the same day went unanswered.

Nukus: Fine

On 27 November 2016 police raided the flat of Bakhytbergen Abdikarimov in Nukus in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region. Officers confiscated Christian materials and a DVD of his wedding. They then took him to a police station where he was questioned for several hours and then released.

While under arrest and repeatedly later, police tried to pressure him into "confessing" that he had broken Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

On 16 March 2017 Nukus City Criminal Court fined Abdikarimov 1,497,750 Soms, or 10 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Court also ordered the confiscation of a Christian book entitled "Social Concept of Evangelical Christian Churches of Uzbekistan", as well as three Christian DVDs.

Aman, who would not give his last name, the Head of Nukus Court's Chancellery, on 15 May refused to discuss the case. Forum 18's subsequent calls to the Chancellery on the same day went unanswered.

Nukus City Police also refused to discuss the case on 15 May.

Tashkent airport: Korans, other Islamic books confiscated from pilgrims

In January customs officials at Tashkent Airport confiscated Korans and other Muslim books from pilgrims returning from the umra pilgrimage to Mecca (known as the "lesser pilgrimage"), a Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals – who witnessed the confiscations – told Forum 18 on 10 May. The pilgrims had bought the Korans and other books in Mecca.

"I do not know if or what punishments the pilgrims received since I do not know them," the Muslim said. "I myself have when in Mecca not bought any religious literature, as I was afraid that I could get into trouble."

Customs officials routinely search travellers and confiscate any religious literature they find, including on mobile phones. The punishments given for the "crime" of having such texts can be severe, and torture can also be used against those who possess religious literature.

The state-controlled procedure for selecting umra pilgrims is the same as for the haj pilgrimage, on which severe restrictions are imposed. Local Muslims also state that officials demand bribes or "unofficial payments" which more than double the cost of pilgrimages.

Khorezm: Arrests, fines, confiscations at border with Turkmenistan

In May, two visiting female Protestants from Turkmenistan were fined in the western Khorezm Region, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Uzbek customs officers searched the Protestants as they prepared to cross back into Turkmenistan, and discovered Christian materials in their mobile phones. The materials included sermons, songs, and the Bible in Uzbek. The two women's passports were confiscated, preventing them from leaving, as were their mobile phones.

Over the next few days officials summoned the women for questioning each day, often for several hours at a time. They were then fined about 14,000 Soms each under the Administrative Code.

The authorities prevented the two women from leaving Uzbekistan on the date they had expected, which was when their Uzbek visas expired. So the women had to extend their Uzbek visas, so that they would not be punished even more for being in the country without the required documentation.

Police excuses for literature seizure raids

"Anti-terrorist measures", "pre-Novruz inspection", "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer are excuses police gave to raid homes and seize religious literature. Police checking for "banned" sermons have not yet returned all computers seized from Muslim college students.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (30.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ot3EY4> - In at least five further known cases since the beginning of the year, police in and around Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent have raided homes and seized Christian and Hare Krishna literature. Police used excuses for the raids, such as "anti-terrorist measures", a "pre-Novruz inspection", a "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer. In Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan, officers seized computers from students of a Muslim college, hunting for "banned" sermons.

After the raid on a Hare Krishna devotee's home, the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent told her that devotees can have only one copy of the religious faith's five main books at home. Any other books have to be held at their state-registered temple.

Police officers in other raids have told individuals that they are not allowed to have any religious books at home.

After a raid on a Baptist home in mid-March, police tried to pressure a church member to spy for them.

Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court in December 2016 refused to overturn large fines on 20 Protestants for holding a meeting to celebrate harvest festival.

Begzod Kadyrov, responsible for work with non-Muslim religious organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to discuss the recent raids on Protestants and the Hare Krishna devotee and confiscations of their literature. "We cannot hold a telephone conversation with you," he told Forum 18 on 30 March, asking it to send questions in writing.

The Committee official responsible for Muslim communities claimed that all the computers seized from the Muslim students in Andijan had been checked and returned.

Literature censorship, raids, seizures, destruction, punishments

Uzbekistan enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. If found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law.

One Tashkent-based religious believer told Forum 18 that they were so scared about the quantity of religious literature in their home that they took it out into the yard of their block of flats and burnt it.

The harshest punishments for the possession of banned religious literature, including on electronic devices, are normally imposed on Muslims. For example, in late 2016 courts imprisoned two more foreign citizens – for five years and three years - for having Islamic sermons on their mobiles as they entered Uzbekistan. One was tortured. Three Tashkent Muslims were given suspended prison sentences, after the father of one was "severely tortured".

As well as widespread seizures of religious literature in raids, customs officers routinely seize such literature or electronic devices containing religious material from people returning to the country.

Tashkent: pre-Novruz inspection, literature seizure

Two officers of Tashkent's Yashnobod District Anti-terrorist Police raided the home of a Baptist couple, Konstantin and Susanna Binkovsky, mid-morning on 11 March. The officers "claimed that it was part of a regular inspection for security reasons on the eve of the Novruz holiday," Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 30 March. Novruz is the Persian New Year celebrated in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the region.

However, as soon as the officers entered the Binkovskys' home, they asked the couple whether they had religious literature. "When they saw a family Bible on the table and a notebook with notes, they seized them immediately," Baptists complained to Forum 18. "Then without a warrant and making records they checked the bookcase and seized all the Christian books." Officers did not provide the couple a copy of the Police report.

Officers then took the husband to Yashnobod District Police Station. His wife later decided to go there also. "Officers questioned both of them, and told them that they will send the literature for expert analysis." Officers asked the husband to "cooperate with the Police, but he refused."

Then on 27 March, after discovering that fellow Baptists had published information about the raid and literature seizure on the internet, the same officers came back to the Binkovskys' home. They threatened the couple that they should not tell others, including fellow Baptists living abroad, about the police actions. Officers again questioned the couple.

Yashnobod Anti-terrorist Police Chief Jabbor Rizkulov insisted that the Police acted lawfully. Asked on 30 March about the reasons of the raid and confiscation of Christian literature, including a Bible, he refused to comment. "You are calling from a foreign country, but this is Uzbekistan with its own laws," he told Forum 18 on 30 March.

Asked why - if the Police acted lawfully - officers threatened the Baptists not to tell their fellow-believers, Rizkulov responded: "Send any further questions through the Foreign Ministry." He then refused to talk to Forum 18.

Tashkent: Bibles, phones, computer seized under "passport regime inspection"

Three Police officers, who included Anti-terror Police Officer Tuychi Azizov and a local Police Officer who gave his name as Batyr (who did not give his last name), raided the home of Protestant couple Andrei and Tursuna Li in Tashkent's Uchtepe District in the early evening of 28 February.

"Officers broke into the flat and conducted an unauthorised search under the guise of a passport regime inspection," Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18.

Officers confiscated two Bibles in Russian, two Bibles in Uzbek and a Concordance (Bible index) in Russian. They also seized two mobile phones and a laptop computer. The Bibles were bought from Uzbekistan's officially registered Bible Society, and "their distribution in the territory of Uzbekistan is legal", the Protestants pointed out.

Jamshid Tillabayev, Chief of Uchtepe District's Criminal and Anti-terrorism Police, confirmed the confiscation. "The confiscated materials are still being examined," he told Forum 18 on 30 March. "When we have finished the examination and religious expert analysis we will return the materials," he claimed.

Asked why Police seize Bibles, a holy book for Christians, Tillabayev did not say. "Call me back later, I'm busy now," was all he said.

Almalyk: Looking for alleged drug dealer in Baptists' flat?

Major Mamur Saparov, Anti-terror Officer of Tashkent Regional Police, Captain Gairat Abdullayev Chief Investigator of the Region's Pskent District Police, Captain Sh. Makhmudov of the same Department, Shokhrukh Safarov, the local Police Officer and two more unidentified officers, broke into the home of Zinaida and Pyotr Brislavsky on the morning of 27 February, "violating their privacy".

The couple are members of the officially registered Baptist Church in the town of Almalyk [Olmaliq], 50 kms (30 miles) south-east of Tashkent.

The Police confiscated 40 Christian books, including a Bible, a New Testament, Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, and an antique book on Russian Orthodox monasteries published in 1895. Also confiscated were 40 copies of the Baptist journal "Fraternal Herald", 45 audio-cassette tapes containing Christian songs, and 15 CDs and DVDs with Christian materials.

Officers presented to the Brislavskys a search warrant signed by Prosecutor Botyr Norov of Pskent District that day. The search warrant was approved by Investigator Captain Abdullayev.

The search warrant said that an unidentified person, who travelled in the same car with Kutbiddin Abdulakhatov, both of whom are suspected of possessing illegal narcotic drugs, escaped the Police and hid in the area where the Baptists' flat is situated.

Based on the words of a witness, the unidentified person is "either hiding in Zinaida Brislavsky's private flat" (her address was then added) or "he may be storing his private items in the same flat."

The Baptists complained that the search warrant is "falsified because among many violations of the Criminal Procedure Code, it does not indicate when the alleged criminals

were apprehended. No names or positions of officers involved in the arrest are indicated."

The Baptists insisted that the search warrant was used "as a pretext to raid" the Brislavskys' flat. The Police "came up with a new idea now, to make the Baptists accomplices of drug dealers!"

"Interestingly, officers demanded the couple hand over the 'missionary' literature," the Baptists noted. "That is to say, they were no longer interested in the fugitive and drugs."

Akmal (who refused to give last name), Deputy Prosecutor of Pskent, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 30 March or put it through to Prosecutor Norov. Asked if Forum 18 could talk to Prosecutor Norov on the reasons of a search warrant to look for a drug dealer in the Baptists' home, he claimed: "He is busy." When Forum 18 persisted with its questions, the Deputy Prosecutor put the phone down. Subsequent calls to the Prosecutor's Office on the same day went unanswered.

Asked about the case on 30 March, Officer Kholmurod (who refused to give his last name) of Tashkent Regional Anti-terrorism Police wrote down the details and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. "I will find out for the reasons for the inspection and will answer you," he said. Called back, he refused to talk to Forum 18. "Send a letter to the Interior Ministry," he said and put the phone down.

Captain Abdullayev of Pskent Police also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. "I cannot talk to you over the phone. Please, come to our Police Station, and I will explain everything to you." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Police's fake witnesses at raid

Eleven officers of Tashkent's Sergeli District Police on 8 February raided the home of Alijon and Natalya Khatamov, members of the officially registered Baptist Church. "Police officers broke into the flat at 5 pm and conducted an unauthorised search," fellow church members complained to Forum 18.

Police confiscated 20 Christian books, including a Concordance, Old and New Testament Commentaries, and a Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, all of which were bought from the Bible Society. Police also confiscated Baptist songbooks and a desktop computer's hard disc.

The officers did not include the titles of the books in the records of the confiscation. The police report was also signed by one person who "falsified signatures of two fake names as two witnesses of the confiscation." No exact addresses of the alleged witnesses were given, the report only indicating that they are from Namangan and Kashkadarya Regions. The Police "has used this trick more than once, to make it difficult to verify these witnesses."

The Police sent the literature for "expert analysis" to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Baptists said that they are "expecting fines after the religious expert analysis".

Tashkent: Hare Krishna devotee fined, community warned

In early 2017 police raided the home of a member of Tashkent's Hare Krishna community. Officers seized about 35 religious books and booklets from her, a fellow-devotee, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 27 March. The devotee did not want to disclose details of the case for security reasons but said that the woman was later "warned and punished with a small fine".

The police "seized some 40 books from her flat and sent it for 'expert analysis'," the devotee told Forum 18. "The Religious Affairs Committee later returned her five books, which are our main religious books, to her and handed over the rest of the books to the Temple in Tashkent."

The Committee "warned the community that each believer can only keep in their homes one copy of each of the five main books, while the rest of the officially allowed literature can only be held within the Temple."

The Hare Krishna devotee said that "we have stopped distributing books in the street or other public places since 2008, since the [Religion] Law banned it." They lamented that "Now we realise that we cannot keep at home religious literature other than those five books."

Andijan: Computers seized on suspicion of "banned" sermons

In the eastern city of Andijan, police seized the personal laptop computers from several students of the city's state-sponsored Sayyid Mukhyiddin makhдум madrassah (Islamic secondary school) in late January.

"Officers suspected that the students may have listened to the sermons of Imam Obid Nazarov or other Imams, which are banned in Uzbekistan, or visited some Islamic sites banned in Uzbekistan," Saidjahon Zaynobiddinov, an independent human rights defender, told Forum 18 on 29 March.

Exiled Imam Nazarov was the subject of a 2012 murder attempt in Sweden, for which his family accuse the Uzbek government of responsibility. Individuals have been punished for listening to his sermons, as well as those of Andijan Imam Abduvali Kori Mirzayev (who "disappeared" with his assistant at Tashkent airport in 1995), and former prisoner of conscience and Muslim sports journalist Khairullo Hamidov (who was released in February 2015).

Zaynobiddinov said that people familiar with the case told him that "some students already received back their computers". However, officers are still checking the computers of others.

Andijan Regional Administration officials (none of whom would give their names) between 29 and 30 March refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 or put it through to any officials overseeing local religious organisations.

Officials of the Andijan Department of the state-sponsored Muslim Board did not want to discuss the computer seizures. One official told Forum 18 on 29 March that he "cannot comment on the case." He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials.

Mukhammadbobur Yuldashev, responsible for work with Mosques and Muslim organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 30 March that the computers had been returned to the students on the same day they were seized. Told that parents of some of the students complained that the computers had still not been returned, he repeated his claim.

Asked why the computers were checked, Yuldashev said that the authorities want to make sure that the students do not read or listen to sermons which are banned in Uzbekistan. He confirmed to Forum 18 that Imam Nazarov's sermons are among those banned.

Parents of some of the students whose computers were seized complained to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service in mid-March that it has been "already two months that the

Police is checking the computers". They noted that in the meantime their children experience difficulties with doing their homework "since there not enough books in the school library and they have to read materials on the internet." They complained, asking: "Why is it taking so long to return the computers?"

The madrassah director, Nurulla Kadyrov, refused to talk to Radio Free Europe in mid-March. He put the phone down when asked why the computers were seized and why the Police did not return them.

Nukus: Fines for harvest festival meeting upheld

The Supreme Court in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qaraqalpakstan] autonomous republic on 26 December 2016 upheld the large fines given in autumn 2016 by Nukus City Court to a group of twenty Protestants, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

A total of 18 - Nazigul Niyazova, Gulsina Aypova, Altyngul Uteniyazova, Injikhon Khojamuratova, Roza Kazakbayeva, Sveta Ubaydullayeva, Peruza Jenmuradova, Shokhista Jumbayeva, Uzildik Jumashева, Makhmudjan Kasymov, Bagila Uteshova, Salamat Kutlumuratov, Zholdasbay Zhanabergenov, Almagul Edilbekova, Kalbike Allabergenova, Kyzlargul Orazniyazova, Aykan Zhumagaliyeva, Bibiaysha Eshmuratova - were each fined 2,995,520 Soms or 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The other two - Kuvatbay Nurmanov and Aykhan Seytmuratova - were each fined 3,744,400 Soms or 25 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Article 184-2 punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and items used to manufacture or distribute them.

According to the Supreme Court decision, the punishments followed a Police raid as part of "anti-terrorist measures" on the group's harvest festival worship meeting. Officers confiscated personal mobile phones, which contained Christian materials, from most of the group members. They also seized a desktop computer's hard disc from Seytmuratova and a New Testament from Niyazova, as well as other books and notebooks.

The Court decision claims that the Protestants "illegally stored or carried" the Christian materials. The telephones, books and notebooks were not returned.

Religious literature fines and confiscations continue

A car has been confiscated from a Protestant because he did not pay illegal fines for giving religious books away. The books were approved by the Religious Affairs Committee, which apparently changed its mind so as to fine the Pastor. Raids and fines continue.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (10.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2IFDDzc> - Bailiffs in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in January confiscated a car from Seventh-day Adventist pastor Andrei Ten because he did not pay an August 2016 fine for giving religious books away. The books had originally been approved by the Religious Affairs Committee, which then apparently changed its mind so as to fine the Pastor. He was denied the chance to appeal against the fine, and an extra fine was imposed for not paying the first fine. The confiscated could be worth more than three times the value of the fines.

In Nukus, police are pressuring a local Protestant to sign a record officers want to dictate admitting to the "offence" of having religious literature in his home.

A total of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses across Uzbekistan are known to have been fined between August 2016 and January 2017 for possessing religious literature and other materials. In the same period, customs officers have confiscated religious books and electronic devices containing religious material from 17 Jehovah's Witnesses arriving in the country.

Severe state censorship

Uzbekistan enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. If found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law.

The harshest punishments for the possession of banned religious literature, including on electronic devices, are normally imposed on Muslims. For example, in late 2016 courts imprisoned two more foreign citizens – for five years and three years - for having Islamic sermons on their mobiles as they entered Uzbekistan. One was tortured. Three Tashkent Muslims were given suspended prison sentences, after the father of one was "severely tortured".

Car confiscated for unpaid illegal fines

In August 2016 police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police arrested four men riding in a taxi in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. They then confiscated copies of a religious book which the Religious Affairs Committee had in writing stated that, after "expert analysis", was allowed to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

One of the men, Pastor Andrei Ten of the registered Seventh-day Adventist Church, was summoned to a police station and asked to write a statement that he gave out copies of the book. He was only then shown a second "expert analysis" in which the Religious Affairs Committee contradicted itself banning the book. Pastor Ten was on 19 August fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three men being each fined five times the minimum monthly wage.

Denied chance to appeal

Pastor Ten has not been given a copy of the 19 August 2016 decision fining him, so denying him a chance to appeal. Neither his 25 August complaint to Olmazor District Court and 28 December cassation appeal to Tashkent City Court were answered, Adventists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 1 February.

Instead Judge Musa Yusupov sent the decision, which had not entered into force, for execution to bailiffs.

Asked why the Judge did this, Aziz Rakhimov, Judge Yusupov's Assistant, on 9 February 2017 claimed that: "I myself gave a copy to Ten three days after the decision". He then declined to discuss the case further.

On 18 January Ten received two letters. The first was a decision to exact the administrative fine imposed in August 2016. The second was a new 19 December 2016

decision imposing an extra fine of 10 times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,497,750 Soms, for failure to pay the first fine. The second fine was signed by Bailiff Imamjan Tuychiyev under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 198-1 ("Failure by a debtor to obey executive orders").

On 19 January Bailiff Tuychiyev with five colleagues broke into the grounds of Ten's home. They waited for Ten, and when he returned home at 8 pm illegally confiscated his car. "Pastor Ten doesn't know where they took the car," Adventists stated.

Bailiff Tuychiyev claimed to Forum 18 on 8 February that "we did everything according to the law". Told that Ten was not given a copy of the original court decision and so could not pay the first fine, and that his complaint and cassation appeals were ignored, Tuychiyev replied: "That's not our problem. You need to ask the court which ordered us to exact the fine."

Told that the market value of Ten's car could be up 30 million Soms, several times the level of the fine, Bailiff Tuychiyev answered: "I am not a market specialist. When he pays the total sum of the fine he can get it back."

Pressure to admit to "offence"

Nine police officers, only one of whom was in uniform, broke into Bakhbergen Abdikarimov's flat in Nukus in the afternoon of 27 November 2016. The police did not have a search warrant, so both their breaking into his home and subsequent search were illegal. Police confiscated one Christian book, three CD and DVD discs - one of which contained a video of Abdikarimov's wedding - and one memory chip, local Protestants who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 2 February.

Police then took Abdikarimov to Nukus Police Station and questioned him for three hours. The unnamed officers demanded that he write a statement they would dictate, in which he would claim to be illegally storing Christian books in his home. Abdikarimov refused to do this and the police then released him.

Since then Nukus Police have been "constantly making phone calls to summoning him to Nukus Police Station", Protestants stated. The police are still trying to force Abdikarimov to sign a police report incriminating himself for allegedly violating Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Major Isak Soliyev of Nukus Police's Criminal Investigation Division refused to discuss the case on 9 February. He asked Forum 18 to call back in one hour, and when called claimed: "We don't know you, and we cannot talk to you over the phone".

Fines follow literature, electronic device seizures

Police raided and searched homes of 43 Jehovah's Witnesses across Uzbekistan for religious literature between August 2016 and January 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. This resulted in the confiscation of 43 publications and electronic devices and 19 Jehovah's Witnesses being fined. A recent example took place in Jizakh Region. Judge Sherzod Peshmirzayev of Jizakh City Criminal Court fined 23-year old Muborak Abdurakhmanova on 22 December 2016 for reading Jehovah's Witness literature. The Judge fined her 20 times the minimum monthly wage or 2,995,500 Soms under Administrative Code Article 184-2, the Court's Chancellery told Forum 18 on 9 February.

Jizakh Regional Administration's official website on 27 January published an article titled "Regret of a woman of thoughtless actions." It instructs readers that "one must not act based on one's impulses but on science and a world view", before adding that:

"Wilfulness and thoughtless actions can bring any person like Abdurakhmanova into the court room." The article claims that Abdurakhmanova admitted in Court that she "became interested in Jehovah's Witnesses, and recorded on her mobile phone video-films made by the followers of this sect. She also made notes in her notebook on various religious topics."

Abdurakhmanova "studied the Bible, listened to sermons by Jehovah's Witnesses and sang religious songs for one year", the article said. She "illegally kept" the religious materials in her phone until 18 November 2016, when police confiscated it from her.

A Jizakh Criminal Court Chancellery official (who would not give his name) refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Calls to Judge Peshmirzayev went unanswered on 9 February.

Uzbekistan frequently raids, arrests, fines, and jails people exercising freedom of religion and belief who possess religious literature. For example, two Protestant five-day prisoners of conscience were ordered in November 2016 to pay 15 per cent each of a month's minimum salary as "compensation" for state prison costs.

Customs seize religious literature

Between August 2016 and January 2017, Uzbek customs officers confiscated religious literature and electronic devices from 17 Jehovah's Witnesses entering the country. Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 on 8 February that "in 2006 the Religious Affairs Committee forbade the import of any Jehovah's Witness publications after a shipment of Bibles were confiscated by customs officers.

Asked why the Religious Affairs Committee bans the import of such religious texts, and why customs officers keep confiscating religious literature from people, Begzod Kadyrov, Committee Chief Expert, replied: "Come to our office". He then put the phone down.
