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Police and Imam "forced family to bury deceased in cemetery where officers took them"

Forum 18 (07.12.2015) - <http://goo.gl/pSBozV> - Fearing problems, a Jehovah's Witness family sought approval from the Religious Affairs Department to bury a deceased family member in a local cemetery in July. Yet police and the local Imam blocked the burial. Asked why he told them not to bury the deceased in the cemetery, Captain Ruslan Allanazarov told Forum 18 News Service: "Because it is Muslim." Police chose a cemetery for the burial 20 kms (12 miles) away and accompanied community members with cars. Officers and the Imam stood outside the family home to prevent people visiting to offer condolences. At a meeting of non-Muslim religious leaders in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, officials proposed or ordered that ethnic Uzbek adherents of non-Muslim faiths should write a will before they die setting out their burial wishes (not required of people of non-Uzbek ethnicities, Muslims or atheists). A state religious affairs official complained about publicity over burial difficulties. "Relatives made so much noise about the cases that the state leaders, who strive for peace in the country, were disturbed," he told the meeting. One Protestant complained to Forum 18 of "pressure on Churches when they complain about burial problems publicly". After one complaint, the authorities "immediately demanded the central organ of the religious community that they make the local believers shut up".

Officials of Uzbekistan's central authorities and local Administrations refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why the authorities on occasion obstruct burials of members of non-Muslim faiths according to their own rites. Officials sometimes deny access to the

local cemetery and force communities to bury individuals in a distant cemetery or to allow burials only with rituals of another faith (often accompanied by a requirement by relatives to renounce the non-Muslim faith publicly).

Officials also refused to say whether cemeteries are open to anyone who dies or officially divided according to religious affiliation, or where members of non-Muslim religious communities can be buried under their own rites.

Some are concerned at an official proposal or order – put to non-Muslim religious leaders at a 4 November meeting in Tashkent – that ethnic Uzbek adherents of non-Muslim faiths should write a will before they die setting out their burial wishes. Officials do not seem to require this of people of non-Uzbek ethnicities, or of Muslims or atheists.

Non-Muslim communities which face burial problems are often highly reluctant to speak publicly of specific cases, preferring to try to resolve them quietly to avoid further conflict, Forum 18 notes.

In a July case in the north-western Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, police and the local Imam banned the burial of a Jehovah's Witness in a local cemetery and forced the family to bury the deceased in a cemetery police officers chose 20 kms (12 miles) away. Police – who installed a surveillance camera opposite the house – also warned that anyone who visited the family to offer condolences would be at risk of fines (see below).

Catholic and Hare Krishna leaders told Forum 18 that they have had to allow some of their deceased members to be buried with Muslim rites to avoid conflicts.

Imams and officials told Forum 18 that non-Muslim communities cannot bury their dead in "Muslim cemeteries". However, in Uzbekistan all cemeteries are state property (except those immediately surrounding places of worship) and there is no official division of cemeteries based on religious beliefs.

Officials exploit fear of shame and ostracism

In Central Asia, being buried with full dignity where ancestors are buried is an important part of local culture. Denying an individual that right can lead to a family suffering shame and ostracism in village society. Uzbek officials often exploit this to put pressure on non-Muslim religious communities.

In 2014 an Uzbek newspaper and Ozbekiston State TV Channel attacked an ethnic Uzbek husband and wife who became Christians. When the wife dies in an accident, elders of the mahalla (local residential district) did not allow her to be buried in any district cemetery, the dead body was not washed, an imam refused to pray over her body, neighbours rejected the family and did not come to the funeral meal, and the dead body of the "apostate" was buried in a remote and abandoned location, the media said.

Officials in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan have similarly failed to prevent obstructions to the burial of members of non-Muslim religious communities according to their own rites.

Officials also refused to discuss tight new restrictions on participation by foreigners in religious community activities and their religious literature issued to non-Muslim leaders of registered religious communities at the 4 November Tashkent meeting (see below).

Bekzod Kadyrov, Chief Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee who addressed the 4 November meeting, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 3 December. "Please send all those questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Neighbours prevented from attending funeral

One recent case of official interference in and obstruction of the burial of a member of a non-Muslim religious community known to Forum 18 took place in Karakalpakstan.

On 28 July, Police Captain Ruslan Allanazarov and Officer Ondasyn Demegenov of Takhiotosh Town Police, and local Imam Tajimurat Orazov in Khodjeli District, "disrupted the funeral ceremony" of a deceased Jehovah's Witness in Takhiotosh.

Later the same day, police cars accompanied the family and local Jehovah's Witnesses gathered for the funeral to the cemetery chosen by the Police and Imam Orazov. There they buried the deceased. "They forced the family to bury the deceased in a cemetery where officers took them," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The cemetery where the family was forced to bury the deceased was in Takhiotosh District, 20 kms (12 miles) from their home.

Refusal to allow the family to bury the deceased in the town cemetery came despite the family providing Captain Allanazarov with a letter from Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department confirming that it "had no objection to the funeral arrangements". The family, apparently fearing burial obstruction, had approached the Department in an attempt to prevent problems.

The telephone of Nurullo Zhamolov and his colleagues at Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 4 and 7 December.

On being presented with the Department's letter, Allanazarov had insisted to the Jehovah's Witnesses that they "cannot bury their dead in the Muslim cemetery."

The police Officer, Imam and members of the mahalla committee (local administration) also stood outside the house of the deceased, preventing neighbours from entering to offer condolences. "The neighbours observed that a camera was installed across the street from the house," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Officers told them that anyone found entering the house would later be fined eight times the minimum monthly wage."

"Our believers experienced great stress over the burial," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18, "because they were not prepared to take the body away from Takhiotosh, the grave was not prepared in that place."

Jehovah's Witnesses cannot bury their dead in local cemetery "because it is Muslim"

Asked on 25 November why he and other officials disrupted the Jehovah's Witness burial ceremony and forced them to bury the deceased not in the cemetery where they wished, but in another cemetery some distance away, Captain Allanazarov avoided the question. "Who gave you my number?" he asked Forum 18.

Asked why he told the Jehovah's Witnesses not to bury their dead in the local cemetery, Captain Allanazarov retorted: "Because it is Muslim." He then said that he could not talk to Forum 18 and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Lieutenant-Colonel Kudrat Ismoilov, Chief of Takhiotosh Town Police, adamantly denied that his Officers Allanazarov and Demegenov disrupted the funeral or that a camera was installed to monitor who was attending the funeral. "Nothing like that happened," he insisted to Forum 18 on 25 November. Asked why then Police officers went to the

Jehovah's Witnesses' home on 28 July, he replied: "They just went there to check up, to see what was happening."

Told that the neighbours had informed the Jehovah's Witness family of the installation of the camera and that they were warned that anyone entering their yard would be fined, Lieutenant-Colonel Ismoilov did not answer. "I cannot discuss this with you over the phone," he said. "Please, come to talk to us at the Police Station." He then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Asked who had asked him to interfere in the funeral of a member of a different faith, Imam Orazov told Forum 18 on 25 November: "No one called me there - the Takhiotosh Police took me there." Asked why he and the police told the Jehovah's Witnesses they cannot bury their dead in the local cemetery, he insisted: "According to Muslim tradition, unbelievers like Jehovah's Witnesses cannot be buried in the same cemetery with Muslims."

Told that during Soviet times many people were buried in the one cemetery - including atheist relatives of local Muslims - and asked why Jehovah's Witnesses cannot be buried alongside their relatives, Imam Orazov did not answer. He also would not say whether cemeteries in Uzbekistan are divided into Muslim and non-Muslim. He then did not wish to discuss the case further with Forum 18.

Rafaddin Omyrzakov, Chief Imam of Takhiotosh, also did not wish to discuss the case. All he would tell Forum 18 on 25 November was that the Jehovah's Witness was buried in the "common cemetery in Takhiotosh District, where anyone can be buried".

Shovkat Shamratov, Assistant of Orazbay Yengibayev, Head of Khodjeli District Administration, on 4 December declined to tell Forum 18 why the local Police and Imam disrupted the Jehovah's Witness burial, and where non-Muslim communities in the District can bury their dead. He wrote down Forum 18's questions, and asked to wait on the line while he asked Yengibayev for a response. Minutes later he asked Forum 18's details and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to Shamratov on the same day went unanswered.

Similarly refusing to discuss burial problems with Forum 18 on 4 December were officials (who would not give their names) of the Administration of Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan.

"Even Russian Orthodox Church did not allow" burial of Protestant

In another case, after the local Imam had blocked burial in the local cemetery of a Protestant in a location away from Tashkent, relatives of the deceased had asked the Orthodox Church to be allowed to use their cemetery. "But even the Russian Orthodox Church did not allow the burial of the Protestant in the Orthodox cemetery when they found out that he was a Protestant," a Protestant from Tashkent recounted to Forum 18.

The Protestant lamented that after this incident, some ethnic Uzbek Church members, in order to be able to go ahead with the burial, "under pressure publicly renounced their faith and declared that they accept Islam". The burial of the Protestant took place with Muslim rites.

Told that the Orthodox Church at least once refused to bury a Protestant in their cemetery, and asked whether Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses can be buried in an Orthodox cemetery, Father Sergi Alakhtayev of the Russian Orthodox diocese in Tashkent responded: "Perhaps the Protestants misunderstood our priest. We do not mind other Christians being buried in our cemetery, but our priests cannot conduct the burial rituals

for them since they are not Orthodox." He said that Protestants can perform their own rituals when burying their dead in an Orthodox cemetery.

Presidential Administration, Cabinet of Ministers refuse to comment

Officials of the Presidential Administration, who would not give their names, also refused to discuss burial problems on 3 December or put Forum 18 through to the Presidential Advisor on ethnic and religious minorities.

Officials at the Cabinet of Ministers on 3 December referred Forum 18 to Lyudmila Nazarova, Inspector of the Legal Expertise Department. But she declined to answer any questions. "You should call the Religious Affairs Committee," Nazarova told Forum 18 on 3 December. Told that Committee officials refused to discuss burial difficulties, she responded: "Please, send your questions in writing." She declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

Ilyas Akhmedov of the International Department of the Muslim Board told Forum 18 on 3 December that cemeteries are divided into Muslim and Christian.

In the capital Tashkent, Shukhrat Turdikulov, Deputy Head of the City Administration with responsibility for religious affairs, also refused to discuss burial difficulties with Forum 18 on 4 December. As soon as he heard the questions, he put the phone down.

Asked with whom it could discuss burial difficulties, the assistant (who did not give his name) of Rakhmanbek Usmanov, Head of the Administration, referred Forum 18 on 4 December to Firuza Khodjaliyeva, the Official responsible for public relations.

Khodjaliyeva told Forum 18 on 4 December that cemeteries are "divided in Uzbekistan into Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Jewish." Asked in which cemetery other religious minorities such as Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses can bury their dead in the capital, and whether the division according to religious affiliation is based on the Law she could not say. "Ask our religious affairs officials," was all she would say. Told that neither City Administration nor Religious Affairs Committee officials are prepared to discuss the issue, she told Forum 18: "I cannot do anything."

State leaders "disturbed" by burial conflicts over ethnic Uzbek non-Muslims

The State Religious Affairs Committee summoned leaders of the officially registered non-Muslim religious communities to a 4 November meeting at the Justice Ministry in Tashkent. Religious Affairs and Justice Ministry officials wanted to discuss with them the issue of burial of their ethnic Uzbek members, those with knowledge of the meeting told Forum 18.

Officials also informed the religious leaders of tighter procedures for inviting foreign citizens to participate in their communities' activity and for foreign citizens or international organisations to import religious materials into Uzbekistan.

Kodyrov, Chief Specialist of the Religious Affairs Committee, who led the meeting, warned the religious leaders that state leaders "are disturbed about the burials of ethnic Uzbeks from Muslim background who joined other faiths," Protestants, informed about the meeting and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 18 November. "Conflicts take place between relatives of the deceased and local administrations since local Imams refuse to conduct the Muslim burial ceremony for such persons," Kodyrov noted at the meeting.

Kodyrov spoke of three such burial conflicts in 2014, one in Karakalpakstan and two in Tashkent Region. "Relatives made so much noise about the cases that the state leaders, who strive for peace in the country, were disturbed," he complained.

The three cases Kodyrov cited appear to be those investigated by Forum 18 in 2014.

Kodyrov "instructed the religious leaders that they must arrange in advance" that ethnic Uzbek members of their communities "write a will indicating where they want to be buried".

"Authorities are stepping up pressure on ethnic Uzbeks who are Christians"

Igor Zakirov, Chair of the Hare Krishna Community, who attended the meeting, told Forum 18 on 26 November that the officials' idea that individuals should sign a will setting out their burial wishes was a "recommendation". He said that it was discussed in the meeting "whether the will should be notarised or not".

However, representatives of another religious community told officials that "once they tried to arrange such a will for their member, the Notary Office told them that they do not legalise such a document," and that the "Law must be amended for such provision."

Asked by Forum 18 on 25 November whether such a will was suggested by the officials as a recommendation or an obligation for ethnic Uzbeks, Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz of the Roman Catholic Church in Tashkent, who participated in the meeting, responded: "I did not quite understand. It was decided in the meeting that the issue would be further analysed and worked on."

Kodyrov told the meeting that more information on the issue would be published on the State Committee's website, Bishop Maculewicz added. (As of 7 December, the State Committee website contains no information on burial issues.)

A Protestant Pastor familiar with the meeting, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 November that "with the new initiative the authorities are stepping up pressure on ethnic Uzbeks who are Christians or would like to become one". He pointed to a recent case when an ethnic Uzbek man was prepared to join his Church. "Local officials warned him that if he joins our Church, no one will bury him, and he will be buried in a place of unbelievers. He then just stopped coming to our meetings."

One Protestant from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 1 December that "We do not understand" whether the authorities are using this to put pressure on ethnic Uzbek Christians or are genuinely interested in solving the problem.

The Protestant elaborated that the authorities "put pressure on Churches when they complain about burial problems publicly". The Protestant pointed to one case in Karakalpakstan in 2014 when local believers talked to the foreign media. "The authorities immediately demanded the central organ of the religious community that they make the local believers shut up," the Protestant noted. "Then they buried the deceased quietly as directed by the local authorities."

The Protestant said that the "impression is that the authorities deliberately create problems over burials to provoke the believers, so that they can then accuse them of religious extremism." By such cases the "authorities want to show the majority of Uzbeks the consequences if they decide to become Christians. It is definitely a powerful tool of pressure on ethnic Uzbek Protestants."

"Who will write such a will?"

Some point to fears of consequences for those who write such a will setting out their burial wishes. "Who will write such a will?" a Protestant from Karakalpakstan asked Forum 18 on 1 December. "I personally will not write one. What must we write there - that I am Christian and that I want to be buried as a Muslim? Many believers do not want to tell the State who they are and how they want to be buried."

By contrast, Father Alakhtayev, responsible for public relations at the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Tashkent, said that the Orthodox "have no problems" with burials. "Our members do not need to write wills since we know who they are," he told Forum 18 on 4 December.

Zakirov of the Hare Krishna Community elaborated that "I do not think we need to arrange such wills for our members. We as a community have had no problems so far with burials since we allow our believers to be buried in a Muslim or Christian way, based on who their relatives are. So far no problems have arisen with local cemeteries or relatives."

Echoing Zakirov, Bishop Maculewicz told Forum 18 that the "Catholics do not need such will as we have not had problems with burials." He explained that "not many Uzbeks have become Catholics." He gave one recent example: "A Catholic woman who lived in one of the regions, who was married to an Uzbek Muslim, was buried in the local cemetery according to Muslim tradition, and we gave our consent to that."

What possible solutions?

Speaking on the possible solutions of the problem, the Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18 that the "Churches think that one possible solution is that their local communities buy their own land plots for burials." However, "often the problem arises where communities do not have official registration because the authorities refuse to give it."

While all Muslim communities are required to be part of the state-backed Muslim Board before they can get the compulsory state registration, officials often block communities of many other faiths from gaining registration or strip state registration from them.

Despite saying that his community has not had problems over burials, Zakirov of the Hare Krishna community admitted to Forum 18 that "We need to have our own cemetery, and do not have one. Soon we will ask the authorities for a plot of land where we can bury our dead, since we have a number of elderly people."

The Protestant from Karakalpakstan told Forum 18 that "even if such a thing as the will is possible, I don't think that the burial problems will be solved." Asked what solutions might be possible, the Protestant observed: "I don't see that the authorities want to solve the problem. So we try to solve the problems on our own. In 2015 we buried some deceased believers, in each case having to search for cemeteries where we could bury them."

State must be informed of each participation of a foreign citizen

During the 4 November meeting at the Justice Ministry, Kodyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee also warned religious community leaders that they must inform the local State Administrations and gain permission one month before any foreign citizen participates in any event of a religious organisation. He itemised the information that must be submitted over each proposed event:

- title, contents (agenda), purpose and form of the activity;

- data of the foreigner who will participate in the event;
- place and exact date of the event, as well as what time it will begin and end;
- information of sponsorship of the event;
- copies (samples) of religious materials which will be used in the event.

The information must include the foreigner's full name, citizenship, full date and place of birth, place of work and occupation, copy of the passport and programme of their stay in Uzbekistan.

Kodyrov also warned the religious leaders that foreigners or international religious organisations which plan to import religious materials to be used in the activities of religious organisations must inform Justice Departments at least one month prior to the proposed use of such imported materials. Such materials can be imported only after written permission is obtained. The application to a Justice Department must include:

- rough draft of the print, audio-visual and other materials;
- samples of the religious materials prepared abroad;
- title, contents and purpose of the materials;
- information on the persons who prepare the materials (full name, citizenship, full date and place of birth, place of work and occupation);
- where, when and with whom the materials will be shared;
- information on the sources of finances for the materials.

Kodyrov told the religious leaders in the meeting that during the authorised activity, religious communities must give free access to Justice Department officials for monitoring. They must allow officials to freely watch the activity so that they can assess whether the materials and activity are in accordance with Uzbekistan's Law and the organisation's charter.

At the end of the meeting, Justice Ministry officials gave each religious leader a copy of the Statute on "Order of authorisation of activities of non-governmental organisations."

"This is done to keep us under very strict control"

"In the past the authorities only asked us to inform them when foreign guests would attend meetings," one Protestant from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 30 November. "But now they demand that we ask for permission for their participation in an event. This is done to keep us under very strict control."

The Protestant told Forum 18 that "I heard that the authorities unofficially warned the Churches that if they catch any Church member sharing their beliefs - especially with those from a non-Christian background - they will punish not only the member but also their pastor. And if it happens repeatedly they will arrest both the believer and their pastor."

Police raid, torture, steal and plant drugs

Forum 18 (26.11.2015) - <http://goo.gl/7iqyZV> - Police in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent raided a Protestant worship meeting on 8 November, detaining and torturing members of the group and their nursing children, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police also stole money and confiscated a large amount of Christian literature, as well as personal property including computers and other electronic devices. Jehovah's Witnesses in the central Samarkand Region have also been raided and fined, some also being put on 2 years' probation on fabricated drugs charges, for meeting together for worship. Police also confiscated religious literature and the private property, including computers and mobile phones, of some present. Female Witnesses were threatened with rape and tortured. Contrary to Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, the police torturers were apparently neither arrested nor prosecuted for their actions. Instead, the police's victims were convicted of exercising freedom of religion or belief and fined. The human rights Ombudsperson's Office has said it cannot investigate these human rights violations.

Police in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent raided a Protestant worship meeting on 8 November and detained and tortured members of the group and their nursing children, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police also confiscated a large amount of Christian literature as well as personal property including computers and other electronic devices. The police victims were subsequently convicted of exercising freedom of religion or belief and fined.

Jehovah's Witnesses in the central Samarkand [Samarqand] Region have also been raided and fined, some on fabricated drugs charges, for meeting together for worship. Police also confiscated a large amount of religious literature and private property, including computers and mobile phones, from those present. Subsequently, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested on the street and then tortured.

Contrary to Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, the police torturers were apparently neither arrested nor prosecuted for their actions.

Tashkent raid

The Tashkent raid was sparked by the headteacher of a school in Tashkent's Yashnobod District telling the District Police that two pupils, who are anonymous for fear of state reprisals, were sharing their beliefs with fellow-pupils, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 13 November. The two "came to a Protestant meeting only twice and shared the good news on their own initiative". After the headteacher contacted police, the pupils allegedly wrote statements against Sarvar Zhuliyev, a local Protestant, on 5 November in Yashnobod Police Station. On 8 November they accompanied police on the raid.

Police in Uzbekistan have previously pressured children who wish to attend a place of worship into writing such statements, and have also confiscated written consent letters of parents allowing their children and young people to attend a church. Physical torture has also been inflicted by police on children. After the November Tashkent raid, police tortured infants by stopping their parents from feeding them (see below).

After extracting statements from the schoolchildren, eight Anti-Terrorism Police from Yashnobod Police Station at 11 am on Sunday 8 November "broke into" Zhuliyev's private home in Kunayev Street in Yakkasaray District, while a group of Protestants were having a worship meeting, the local Protestants told Forum 18. "All the police were in plainclothes and one of them was masked and armed with an automatic handgun." Police then "turned upside down the table and all the chairs in the house".

Police confiscated Christian religious materials and private property, including notebook computers, computer hard discs, i-pads, mobile phones, memory chips, cameras, an acoustic guitar with its case, 100 Christian books (including 5 New Testaments in Uzbek and 3 Bibles in Russian), audio tapes, CDs, DVDs and leaflets with Biblical texts. "Police also stole 300,000 Soms" (about 950 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros, or 110 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), Forum 18 was told.

Torture during raid

Anti-Terrorism Police "unlawfully handcuffed" Zhuliyev and Erik Tajibayev and the unidentified masked and armed police officer "hit and kicked" Ruslan Bekzhanov "in the head and abdomen". His upper lip was split during this assault.

Police then took the 12 Protestants to Yashnobod Police Station. Those detained were Bekzhanov, Zhuliyev, Tajibayev, Dilsuz Zununova, Gulnoza Khasanova, Zhavokhir Abdullayev, Odila Bobokulova, the brothers Meirbek and David Tajibayev, Erzhan Tajibayev, Diyora Khamidova, and Shavkatilla Soliyev. The detained Protestants, some of them with infant nursing children, were brought to the Police Station at 12.30 pm.

Protestants noted that, as the police came from Yashnobod District, it was unlawful for them to raid a meeting in Yakkasaray District.

Torture in Police Station

In Yashnobod Police Station police "hit with the palm of their hands" Erzhan Tajibayev and Abdullayev. Police "refused the detainees both the use of toilet and water to drink". Parents of five infants, who included Zhuliyev's 10-month old son, were not allowed to feed their infants until they wrote statements against Zhuliyev and themselves. All parents were compelled to write statements that Zhuliyev "taught them the faith of Jesus Christ." Police also interrogated some of the young children on their own and compelled them to write similar statements. Zhuliyev was ordered to write a statement "against some South Koreans to deport them from Uzbekistan".

The Protestants were kept at the Police Station for nine hours and released at 9.30 pm in the evening.

International obligations

The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), 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".

Uzbekistan has grave international obligations under the CAT, including the obligation to arrest, try under criminal law and if found guilty severely punish officials guilty of torture.

Why torture?

When Forum 18 asked why Anti-Terrorism Police raided a meeting for worship and tortured those present, Major Oybek Kayimkhodzayev, Chief of Yashnobod Anti-Terrorism Police stated: "We referred the case to Yashnobod Court, and it fined them." Asked what measures were or will be taken about the police who tortured Bekzhanov and others,

Kayimkhodjayev claimed to Forum that "we punished them". Asked for the names of the police punished with the punishments given to them, he claimed to Forum 18 on 23 November that "you know we cannot inform you about such cases over the phone". He then refused to discuss the case further.

Victims, not torturers, prosecuted and punished

On 16 November Yashnobod District Criminal Court fined the 12 Protestants under the Code of Administrative Offences' Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"), 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") 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"). Punishments range from a fine of up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary under Article 184-2 and 240 to short-term jailing of up to 15 days under Article 240 and 241.

Chancellery officials and Judge Anvar Khusainov refused to discuss the case and torture of by police with Forum 18 on 16 November. Judge Khusainov claimed that "I cannot hear you well", even though the phone line was very clear. He then put the phone down. Called again, when Khusainov's Secretary told the Judge about the call he asked her to put the phone down. She did this.

Samarkand raid and torture

In Samarkand Region, Pstdargom District Police raided a private home on 1 May where eight Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting for worship. The Witnesses, who are anonymous for fear of state reprisals, were "threatened, interrogated, and battered", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 18 November. "Police planted drugs on one of the male Witnesses and severely physically tortured one male and one female Witness. Also, two other women were sexually assaulted both physically and verbally."

Police confiscated the Jehovah's Witnesses' personal religious literature and property, including 15 DVDs, 39 religious leaflets, one hand-written notebook, 18 leaflets with prayers, three mobile phones and a notebook computer worth 300,000 Soms (about 950 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros, or 110 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Police brought the detained Jehovah's Witnesses to the District Police Station on the same day, and "interrogated them from 7.00 pm in the evening of 1 May until 8.00 am the following morning", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Major Rustam Rakhmatov, who questioned the Jehovah's Witnesses, was drunk.

Police officers told the two women they had tortured that "if they filed any claims of sexual assault, the police would charge them with giving false evidence."

Victims, not torturers, prosecuted and punished

On 22 June Pstdargom District Criminal Court found six of the eight Jehovah's Witnesses guilty 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"), Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Five of the six received fines of 10 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,184,000 Soms (about 3,750 Norwegian Kroner, 410 Euros, or 430 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). One of these was also found guilty under 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"). The sixth was fined

five times the minimum monthly wage, 592,000 Soms (about 1,875 Norwegian Kroner, 205 Euros, or 215 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), under Article 184-2.

The Court also ordered that the male Jehovah's Witness, on whom the police planted drugs, serve two years on probation.

Seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses' books, including a New Testament and a Bible in Uzbek, were ordered to be given to the Samarkand Department of the Muslim Board. The Board is under complete state control (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). An official, who refused to give his name, of Samarkand Muslim Board denied to Forum 18 on 24 November that the books were given to them. Asked what the Muslim Board will do or did with the Jehovah's Witnesses books, he claimed that "we do not have any Jehovah's Witnesses books, and never received any."

The Court also ordered that the Jehovah's Witnesses confiscated personal property be given to the state, and that the religious DVDs, leaflets, and notebooks be destroyed. Confiscated religious literature and materials, including the Bible and Islamic texts, have often been ordered by courts to be destroyed.

Why torture?

Judge Muhiddin Tukhtayev, Chair of Pastrogom Court on 23 November refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Asked why the Court punished the Jehovah's Witnesses he replied "please send your questions in writing". Asked what measures were taken by the authorities against the police officers who tortured the Jehovah's Witnesses, including with sexual assault, Judge Tukhtayev repeated his previous answer. He then declined to talk to Forum 18.

Police arrest and torture two female Jehovah's Witnesses

On 19 June Samarkand Police arrested on the street two female Witnesses and took them to a police station. The Police Chief "questioned the two for over seven hours", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

One police officer attempted rape and gave one of the women an ultimatum: she could choose to spend 15 days in prison or have her hair forcibly cut. With scissors in hand, the officer approached her. But when she warned the officer that she would report the attempted rape, he stopped. Another police officer then "grabbed her by the hair and flung her against the wall".

Women in particular are often targeted by male officials for assault, including sexual violence.

Why torture?

Asked why police under his authority raided a meeting for worship, planted drugs, and tortured, including sexually assaulted, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Samarkand Criminal Investigation Department Head Ismoilkhon Elomov claimed that "I did not work in this Division in that period." Asked whether or not the responsible officers were punished, Elomov replied that "I will investigate these issues. Call us back at 6 pm tomorrow". No answer was received.

The Ombudsperson who won't investigate human rights violations

Asked why the Anti-Terrorism Police raid and disrupt meetings for worship of religious communities, and why police officers tortured, including with sexual assault, Protestants

and Jehovah's Witnesses, the Interior Ministry's press office referred Forum 18 on 24 November to the Ministry's Criminal Investigations and Struggle against Terrorism Directorate.

Asked the same questions, the Assistant (who would not give his name) of Directorate Head Lieutenant Colonel Uktam Murodov told Forum 18 on 24 November that Murodov "is in a meeting". He then said that "I will see if Murodov would like to talk to you". Seconds later the Assistant put the phone down. Called back, the Assistant told Forum 18 that it is a "wrong number". He then put the phone down.

"Neither Jehovah's Witnesses nor Protestants wrote to us about violations, so we cannot investigate those cases", Saidbeg Azimov, Assistant to human rights Ombudsperson Ulugbek Mukhamadiyev told Forum 18 on 24 November. Asked on what grounds the Anti-Terrorism Police raids meetings for worship and tortures those present, Azimov repeated his previous answer. He asked Forum 18 to inform the Ombudsperson's Office in writing about the cases, but would not answer when asked why the Ombudsperson did not investigate violations previously reported by international human rights organisations.

Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson's Office is not accredited with the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights as compliant with the Paris Principles on the independence of such national human rights bodies from government.

New fines, Bible destructions follow UN concern over religious censorship

Forum 18 (18.11.2015) - <http://goo.gl/Sgg1B5> - In late September a Judge in Karshi fined ten members of a Baptist church up to 50 times the minimum monthly wage each for meeting for worship without state permission. In a regular practice for Uzbekistan, the Judge ordered that confiscated personal Bibles and song books be destroyed. Officers asked the community in August why it was still meeting after being warned in an April raid that it was "illegal". Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service of more than 75 fines of up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage between January and September 2015 after raids and literature seizures. Seven were twice stopped after making a 1,000-kilometre (620 mile) round trip from Karshi to the one registered Jehovah's Witness community in Chirchik. The United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern in July over religious censorship, as well as torture, prison sentences, detentions and fines to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. It called on Uzbekistan to change its laws and practices.

Ten members of a religious community in Karshi [Qarshi], which meets for worship without seeking the state registration Uzbekistan demands, were fined in late September, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The Judge ordered that their confiscated personal Bibles and song books be destroyed. The punishments followed a Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raid on the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in April and a follow-up visit in August by two officials who asked why they were still meeting for worship despite being warned not to. Officials questioned church members' children separately in the absence of their parents or legal representatives.

Police and NSS secret police raided Jehovah's Witnesses' homes and worship meetings across Uzbekistan 81 times in 2014, they complained to Forum 18. Between January and September 2015, they noted continuing raids and literature seizures, with more than 75 fines of up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage (see below).

Twenty times the minimum monthly wage, since 1 September, is 2,604,800 Soms (8,250 Norwegian Kroner, 900 Euros or 950 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

In late September, a Baptist in the capital Tashkent was stopped by Police in the metro, who found religious books in his bag. In early October officers of the anti-Terrorism police used physical force when questioning him. A court fined him for carrying his Christian books in his bag (see below).

Police and NSS secret police regularly raid meetings for worship, including those of Baptists and other Protestants, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. Courts often hand down fines for "illegally" possessing religious literature and violation of the Religion Law. They also often order that confiscated religious literature be destroyed.

On 8 November armed police – some of them masked - raided the worship meeting of local Protestants in Tashkent. Without showing a warrant, officers seized religious books, discs, a guitar, computers and phones. Church members – including children - were taken to the police station where some were tortured.

The Justice Ministry, together with the State Religious Affairs Committee, on 4 November gathered leaders of officially registered non-Muslim religious communities in Tashkent to instruct them to provide the state with detailed information on their religious activities, as well as any foreigners who attend their activities.

United Nations calls for legal changes to end violations

On 21 July, after considering Uzbekistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed concern that "the legal provisions prohibiting proselytism and other missionary activities continue to be in force".

The Committee also expressed concern about "unlawful arrests, detentions, torture and ill-treatment and convictions on religious extremism related charges of independent Muslims practising their faith outside registered structures", "arrest for 'illegal religious activity', detention, fines and prison sentences" for others who practice their faith "outside registered structures", and "censorship of religious materials and restrictions on their use only inside buildings of registered religious groups".

"The State party should guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief," the UN Human Rights Committee insisted in its report (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4). It said laws and practice must be changed to comply with the country's human rights commitments, including "through the decriminalization of proselytism and other missionary activities". It also called for investigation of "all acts of interference with the freedom of religion" of people "practising their religion outside registered structures".

81 raids in 2014, more than 75 fines in 2015

Among the religious communities which officials regularly raid, confiscate religious literature from and fine are Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2014 Police and NSS secret police raided their homes and worship meetings across Uzbekistan 81 times, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Raids continued in 2015, resulting in more than 75 fines on individuals between January and September 2015, with 55 of these fines to punish possessing religious literature. "Fines in 2015 varied from smaller amounts up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage," Jehovah's Witnesses lamented.

Officials have allowed only one Jehovah's Witness community in the whole country – in the town of Chirchik in Tashkent Region – to have the state registration which officials

insist is required before people can exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. Officials stripped registration from the Jehovah's Witness community in Fergana in 2006. Other Jehovah's Witness communities have been repeatedly denied state registration.

Two raids within two months, huge fines, literature destruction

On 25 September Judge Kosym Kholov, Chair of Karshi Criminal Court in Kashkadarya Region, fined ten members of a Baptist Church. They were punished under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 (violation of the Religion Law) and Article 184-2 (illegal storage of religious literature).

Fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage each, 6,512,000 Soms, were Viktor Tashpulatov, Mikhail Balykbayev, Nabizhon Bolikulov. Seven others - Utkir Karimov, Anvar Karimov, Ruzimurod Khonov, Ibrahim Khamidov, Kosim Ochilov, Khamid Rakhmanov and Mamakhol Khalbekova - were each fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,907,200 Soms.

Judge Kholov also with the same decision ordered the destruction of personal Bibles, Easter greeting cards addressed to members of the church as well as the Church's song books confiscated from the Baptists.

The ten fined Baptists received copies of the Court decision by mail on 9 October, church member Svetlana Andreychenko told Forum 18 on 12 November. She said they appealed against the decision on 23 October to the Regional Court "but have not yet received a response". She explained that the Regional Court has one month to respond to the complaint by Law.

Asked about the case, Ilhom Samiyev, Deputy Chair of the Karshi Court, insisted to Forum 18 on 13 November that the "Baptists violated the Law". However, he declined to discuss the case. Judge Kholov "is on vacation but you can talk to his Assistant, Bigmat Rakhmatov after lunch," he said.

Church "poisons the minds of children and deprives them of bright future"

Punishments followed raids on the Baptists' Sunday worship services in Karshi in April and August, Baptists told Forum 18.

The first raid took place on 26 April, when some thirty officials from the NSS secret police, regular Police, the local Police officer, Chair of the local mahalla Committee (residential administration) disrupted the Baptists' worship meeting.

The officials "took down the names of the worshippers, questioned them including some children also asking them in which public schools they studied." The officials "filmed the worship meeting" and "compelled some neighbours" who live near the worship place to "speak to the camera against the community, saying what they were dictated by the raiding officials."

The officers also filmed Gafur Imamov, who presented himself as representing Karshi City Education Department, declaring that the Church "poisons the minds of the children and deprives them of their bright future", Baptists complained to Forum 18. After seizing religious materials from the worshippers, the officers left.

Arif Nizamov, Head of Karshi Education Department, insisted that his Department "had nothing to do with" the raid. "We do not have anybody named Imamov working for the Department," he claimed to Forum 18 on 13 November. "We are not competent to check up on religious organisations." He referred Forum 18 to Karshi Hokimat's [Administration] religious affairs officials.

Muhiddin Shadmanov, Assistant to Bakhtiyor Kodirov, Deputy of the Hokim [Head of Administration] of Karshi with responsibility for religious issues, declined to comment on the raid on 13 November. Kodirov is "busy and cannot talk to Forum 18," he claimed.

Why still meeting for worship?

Some three months later, on 2 August, again during the Sunday worship service, two plain-clothed officials, who also led the April raid, came to inspect the Baptists. One of them gave his name as Jamshid (last name not given). The officials asked the Baptists why they were still gathering for worship after they were warned on 26 April. They took down the names of new people attending the meeting, and left saying that they will soon refer the case to Court.

Karshi City Police told Forum 18 on 13 November the officer who raided the 2 August Baptist meeting was Jamal Sharipov.

Sharipov claimed to Forum 18 on 13 November that the activities of the Baptists are "banned" in Uzbekistan. Asked what he means and what State authority banned the Baptists' activity, he did not say. "I cannot explain this to you, please, call me back in 30 minutes." Called back later, Sharipov's phone was switched off.

Threatened for attending state-registered meetings for worship

Authorities also punish Jehovah's Witnesses who try to abide by the very restrictive regulations imposed on their religious freedom. Police in Karshi on 7 March and 19 March stopped seven Jehovah's Witnesses as they returned from worship meetings held in Chirchik. The seven had to travel more than 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) round-trip to Chirchik as it is the only place where they can officially meet for worship.

Police then searched their homes without a warrant and confiscated Bibles and personal belongings, such as mobile devices and personal notes, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. One of the seven, who was detained and questioned on 19 March, was again questioned one month later in April. "Police threatened to charge her criminally for illegal religious activity."

Stopped at metro station, fined for religious books

On 21 September, Police at Tashkent Metro Station in Mirabad District stopped a Baptist, Timur Akhmedov. "When the Police officers realised that he had a Bible, Christian booklets and discs, they confiscated the literature and questioned Akhmedov about where he received the books," his fellow church members told Forum 18. "They then released him, saying they would send the literature for 'expert' analysis."

Fifteen days later, on 6 October, Akhmedov was summoned by the same Metro Police where he was detained and taken to Mirabad Police Station. "Mirabad Police bullied Akhmedov, pushing and pulling him, hitting him a couple of times. Officers questioned him about where he received the literature." The Baptists lamented that the Police did this "despite the fact the religious 'expert' analysis said that, except for three booklets, the state allowed the Bible and the rest of the literature were allowed to be used inside Churches." The Mirabad Police prepared an administrative case the same day and took Akhmedov to the Court.

On 6 October Judge Matyanboy Matchanov of Tashkent's Mirabad District Criminal Court fined Akhmedov five times the minimum monthly wage, 651,200 Soms, under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for illegal storage of religious literature, his fellow

Baptists complained to Forum 18. The Judge also with the same decision ordered the destruction of his personal Bible and other confiscated literature.

Asked why Judge Matchanov fined Akhmedov for carrying his Christian books, which are officially permitted by the State, Jasur Baltabayev, his Assistant took down Forum 18's name and question, and asked Forum 18 to call back in five minutes. Subsequent calls to Judge Matchanov went unanswered. Once Baltabayev answered the phone, but as soon as he heard Forum 18's name put the phone down.

"Our duty to examine bags"

Major Ramiz Badriddinov of Tashkent City Metro Police on 12 November told Forum 18 Akhmedov's bag had been searched "because it is our duty to examine passengers' bags for security reasons, and we found the religious literature." He added that "if we find religious literature we must send it to the State Religious Affairs Committee, which we did." The Metro Police then referred the case to the Mirabad District Police's anti-Terrorism Unit to "prepare the case for administrative punishment." He explained that the Metro Police is "not competent" to prepare cases for Court.

Asked why Akhmedov was prosecuted for having religious books which even the state's "expert" analysis said were allowed to be used in Churches, Badriddinov did not answer. He did not wish to talk to Forum 18 further and referred it to Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police.

Asked why Akhmedov had been bullied and questioned simply for carrying religious books in his bag, Mukabyr Jalalov, Chief of Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police adamantly insisted to Forum 18 on 12 November that his Unit had not handled the case. "If the Metro Police stopped him, then they must have questioned him and prepared the case for Court." Told that the Metro Police told Forum 18 that Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police questioned Akhmedov and referred the case to Court, and asked why Akhmedov was harassed by his officers and taken to the Court, Jalalov repeated his previous claim.

Large fine he knew nothing about

Elsewhere in Navoi [Navoiy] Region, in early July Navoi City Court Bailiffs summoned local Baptist Nikolai Serin, instructing him to pay a fine given to him ten months earlier which he knew nothing about. On 5 September 2014, Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi City Criminal Court had heard the case in his absence, and found Serin guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Judge fined him 50 times the minimum monthly wage (as of August 2014), 4,805,250 Soms.

Judge Mansurov with the same decision ordered the destruction of DVDs and CDs, and confiscation of Serin's computer for the benefit of the State, handing over the Christian books to the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent.

"I did not know about the fine since I was in hospital seriously injured from a car accident," Serin told Forum 18 on 12 November 2015. He complained that the Court did not provide him with a copy of the decision, and that he received it from the Bailiffs in July for the first time.

The fine followed a Police raid on Serin's home in Navoi on 17 August 2014. A Sunday worship service at another Navoi home was raided the same day.

Norbek Mirzayev, Assistant to Judge Mansurov, refused to comment on the case on 12 November or put Forum 18 through to the Judge. Asked why Serin was given such a huge fine for keeping his Bible and other Christian books in his home, why the case was

heard in his absence and why he was provided with a copy of the decision only a year later, Mirzayev replied: "I am not competent to answer your questions."

Asked to put Forum 18 through to the Judge or anyone in the Court who could answer the questions, Mirzayev brushed off Forum 18. "Neither the Judge nor anyone else will talk to you. We don't know who you are."

Judge Mansurov regularly fines individuals for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. He even writes articles attacking their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Religious literature "enough evidence to prove my guilt"

Serin appealed in July 2015 to Navoi Regional Criminal Court complaining that the fine was "unlawful" since he did "not violate the law" by storing the Christian literature in his home. He also complained that Navoi City Court "violated the procedures" by hearing the case in his absence as well as by providing the copy of the decision to him only ten months later.

However on 16 October, again in his absence, Judge Nozira Kodyrova of the Regional Court upheld the City Court decision. Kodyrova "ignored our arguments about the procedural violations in her decisions, saying that the fact I was absent is not important", Serin complained to Forum 18. She argued that the "religious literature confiscated from my home is enough evidence to prove my guilt."

Serin told Forum 18 he will file a cassation appeal against Kadyrova's decision. "I understand if Kadyrova cancelled the fine or returned the case for further investigation by the first instance Court then the confiscated materials should have been returned to me." However, "they cannot do that since who knows where, for instance, my notebook computer is. I am sure some official owns it now, and has been using it," he lamented.

Boby Akhadov, Head of the Chancellery of Navoi Regional Court, refused to comment on the case on 13 November. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Kodyrova or the Chair of the Court, claiming that they were busy. "All you can do is visit the Court on Thursdays if you have any questions."

Fines of up to 20 times minimum wage

Among the fines given in 2015 to Jehovah's Witnesses, the largest known to Forum 18 was a 10 February fine in Navoi Region of 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The fine followed a 17 January Police and NSS secret police raid on the woman's home. Officers confiscated her Bible and computer.

Police detained a Jehovah's Witness in Angren in Tashkent Region on 9 June and took her to the Prosecutor's Office. "There she was interrogated and forced to write a statement saying that she is a Jehovah's Witness and has religious literature at her home." She was fined in her absence and not given a copy of the court decision.

On 20 July in Tashkent, Police and NSS secret police raided and searched the home of a Jehovah's Witness. "All her personal religious literature was seized, along with personal belongings such as her computer," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Police in Almalyk in Tashkent Region in July raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness, seizing her personal religious literature. On 23 July Almalyk District Criminal Court fined her 8 times the minimum monthly wage.

Police in Denov in the south-eastern Surkhandarya Region on 4 July raided and searched the homes of two Jehovah's Witnesses. "Police interrogated the women, forced them to write statements that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, and seized religious materials."

Samarkand raids

Samarkand Police on 19 February "entered the home of a female Witness under the pretext of speaking to her husband", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers then confiscated her religious literature. "Police forced the Witness to write explanatory notes on the source of her personal religious literature, brought her to the police station, and confiscated her mobile phone." Her husband, who is not a Jehovah's Witness, "was told to write an explanatory note stating that he burned his wife's religious literature." In a hearing on 20 March in her absence, Samarkand Criminal Court gave her an administrative fine.

Samarkand Police also on 16 April raided a worship meeting of six Jehovah's Witnesses in a home. Officers confiscated personal religious literature, mobile phones and other belongings.

Uzbekistan arrests 200 alleged ISIL 'sympathisers'

Rights group says most of those arrested since October were migrant workers returning home from abroad.

Aljazeera (16.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1H6rQDy> - At least 200 Muslims have been arrested in Uzbekistan for allegedly having the intention to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or being sympathetic to the armed group, a human rights group says.

The arrests started in early October in and around the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, and take place almost daily amid massive checks and searches, the Initiative Group of Independent Rights Defenders said on Monday.

Most of the arrested men are migrant workers who returned home from Russia, Turkey or Western Europe and have nothing to do with ISIL, the group's chairman, Surat Ikramov, told Al Jazeera.

"They find five real militants and arrest 50 innocent men who will be tortured and forced to confess," he said. "Some of them are not even observant Muslims."

About two million Uzbeks toil in Russia, mostly in menial jobs. Russian authorities claim that some of them are "radicalised" and recruited by ISIL amid an unfolding economic crisis in Russia and back home.

'Artificially creating terrorists'

The new arrests in Uzbekistan have little to do with "wannabe ISIL fighters", a Moscow-based writer says.

Uzbek authorities "artificially create 'terrorists' to report on the terrorist cells they allegedly identified", Daniil Kislov, whose website is banned in Uzbekistan, told Al Jazeera. "They need to keep the machine going, to get more funding and new chevrons."

Uzbek officials declined to comment on the arrests. Most foreign media outlets have been expelled from Uzbekistan.

In March, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an armed group founded in the early 1990s, pledged allegiance to ISIL in a video that also showed a beheading of a captive Afghan soldier.

The group staged several attacks in Central Asia and relocated to Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal zone in the late 1990s, where they colluded with the Taliban and fought against the US-led forces.

Hundreds of natives of Central Asia have joined ISIL in recent years, officials say.

Alarmed by the threat of attacks, Uzbek President Islam Karimov, a former Communist bureaucrat, has for years been cracking down on Muslims who attend mosques unsanctioned by authorities.

Thousands of peaceful Muslims have been jailed in the ex-Soviet nation of 31 million people, where they are routinely tortured and abused, rights groups and survivors say.

The pressure on believers intensified after Uzbek troops mowed down hundreds of protesters, including women and children, in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan in 2005 in what became the bloodiest crackdown on a popular revolt in the former Soviet Union.

Over 160 year wait to go on haj pilgrimage?

Forum 18 (18.09.2015) - <http://goo.gl/QEjM5J> - Uzbekistan continues severely restricting the Muslims who can on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, Forum 18 News Service notes. The state imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims and refuses to explain why it does this. People can only get onto the extremely long pilgrimage waiting lists after extensive scrutiny by state agencies including the NSS secret police. Shaira Sadygbekova of Ezgulik human rights organisation has calculated that she will need to live to be 205 years old to reach the top of the waiting list. The head of her mahalla (city district) – one of the agencies which decides who gets onto waiting lists – told Forum 18 that she "will be able to go in 20 or 30 years". Even if people reach the top of the waiting list they may be arbitrarily denied an exit visa to go on pilgrimage. State-run banks often refuse to distribute enough hard currency to pilgrims, according to human rights defenders including Surat Ikramov. A wide variety of state officials have refused to discuss the problems with Forum 18.

Uzbekistan continues to severely restrict the ability of Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca their faith requires, Forum 18 News Service notes. Every able-bodied healthy adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime.

Yet Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims, severely restricts who can get onto the extremely long pilgrimage waiting lists, arbitrarily alters who can go on the pilgrimage and when they can go, imposes a large financial cost for going on the pilgrimage, and restricts the amount of hard currency that may be exchanged for Soms or even prevents pilgrims receiving the currency they need.

All the state-approved haj pilgrims flew from seven cities of Uzbekistan to Saudi Arabia on state-run Uzbekistan Airways, departing between 3 and 14 September. They are due to return on completion of the haj between 27 September and 8 October.

Severe restrictions on pilgrim numbers

Uzbekistan routinely imposes severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in the annual haj pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Only 5,080 out of a potential quota of about 28,000 allocated by the Saudi authorities (based on Muslim population numbers) travelled to Mecca in 2011. In 2015 the state Religious Affairs Committee announced that Uzbekistan would send 5,200 pilgrims to Mecca. This is about the average annual figure from Uzbekistan. About as many pilgrims travelled from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which has only about one fifth of Uzbekistan's population.

An official of one Uzbek mahalla (local district), with between 3,000 and 7,000 residents, told Forum 18 that "several people are on the waiting list but maybe only one will go". An "unwritten instruction" bans would-be pilgrims under the age of.

These restrictions are long standing, and the authorities are reluctant to explain why they impose them on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Asked who decided the 2015 quota for Uzbekistan, Deputy Chief Mufti Haji Abdulaziz Mansurov of the Muslim Board (who has himself made the pilgrimage) told Forum 18 that it was the "decision of Saudi Arabia's Haj Ministry, which decided to give Uzbekistan the quota". He claimed that the "Haj Ministry decided this because there are large-scale repair works undertaken in Haj sites." Haji Mansurov claimed that the Haj Ministry will "give us a quota for 10,000 pilgrims next year."

When Forum 18 asked why Uzbekistan was given a much smaller quota than smaller countries, Mansurov hesitated before responding: "It may be because each country has a special order of its own". Asked what he means by this he did not answer. He then claimed that Uzbekistan will "increase the quota by 5,000 each year until we reach the accepted norm of one pilgrim per 1,000 head of population, i.e., 30,000 pilgrims a few years from now".

Hosni Bostaji, Director General of Saudi Arabia's Office of the Haj Minister declined to comment on the question on 16 September. He asked Forum 18 to send its questions in writing. The Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent on 15 September referred Forum 18 to Consul Muhammad Al-Tamimi. Asked whether Saudi Arabia gave the quota of 5,200 to Uzbekistan or Uzbekistan decided it, Al-Tamimi declined to say. He referred Forum 18 to the Uzbek authorities and did not wish to discuss the issue.

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 National Security Service (NSS) secret police, the state-controlled Muslim Board (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.

Pilgrims can wait for over 160 years

Potential pilgrims may have to wait for many years, and in some cases this may make the pilgrimage impossible due to their age and the very long waiting list.

"I was 46th on the list, then moved to 146th place, and now I can only go on haj when I am 205," Shaira Sadygbekova, a Muslim and member of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation, lamented to Forum 18 on 15 September.

She was put on her mahalla's waiting list in 2007 in 46th place in her local Orikzor Mahalla in Tashkent's Uchteppa District. In 2010 she asked the Mahalla Administration how far she had advanced in the list and was given a certificate, which Forum 18 has seen, that she is 146th on the mahalla's list. She complained about this on 1 May 2012 to Tashkent City Administration's then

Deputy Head Nizomiddin Bakhtiyorov, who promised her that she would soon be able to go on haj. "I am still waiting," she told Forum 18.

Sadygbekova noted that, as only one person per year from her mahalla is allowed to go on the haj, she will only be permitted to go on it if she survives to be 205 years old.

Some officials are known to remove or downgrade ordinary people on waiting lists, to allow the officials' friends and relatives to go on the haj instead. Officials – including from the Muslim Board and the Religious Affairs Committee – are also said to demand bribes for people to be included on the waiting list.

Abdumazhid Yokubov, Chair of Sadygbekova's mahalla, on 15 September would not comment on why Sadygbekova's place in the waiting was downgraded. He claimed that "each year five or six people go on the haj from our mahalla. [Sadygbekova] will be able to go in 20 or 30 years". Told that she may be dead by then, he replied that "we cannot do anything about it".

Sadygbekova is 59. In 2013 the World Health Organisation estimated female life expectancy in Uzbekistan at 71.8 years. Male life expectancy was estimated at 69.2 years.

Asked why Uzbekistan sends so few pilgrims, Yokubov stated that "I know it's not fair that Uzbekistan should have so few pilgrims but we cannot do anything about it". Asked who decides the quota and how many pilgrims should there be from any mahalla, he referred Forum 18 to Tashkent City Administration. Some mahallas are not allowed to send pilgrims for several years.

Sadygbekova stated to Forum 18 again that only one person from her mahalla goes on the haj each year, and that Yokubov is "afraid of Tashkent City Administration, and therefore he is lying". She pointed out that "Tashkent Region alone has thousands of mahallas. If each Tashkent mahalla sent five or six pilgrims, this would use up Uzbekistan's total 2015 target of 5,200 pilgrims". She noted that this would mean that "no-one in the rest of Uzbekistan could go on pilgrimage".

At Tashkent City Administration neither Deputy Head Shukhrat Turdikuov, who oversees religious affairs and the haj in Tashkent City, nor his assistant Dilshod Abdrazakov, was willing to discuss the issue on 15 September. Shovkat Hamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee, was also unwilling on 15 September to explain why the numbers of pilgrims and the organisation of the haj must be controlled by the state.

Even pilgrims at top of waiting lists refused pilgrimage places

When – or if - 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 apart from several former Soviet republics. The NSS secret police maintains an exit blacklist – for example of human rights defenders – who may not be allowed to travel.

Special instructions are given to successful 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.

It is also said in Uzbekistan that successful applicants are arbitrarily removed from the pilgrimage and replaced with the friends or family members of officials. An Imam outside Tashkent, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained in 2011 that "unofficial payments" more than doubled the cost of the haj. "The number of applicants would be much, much higher if the cost was not so high", he stated.

Large cost of state-controlled pilgrimages

Pilgrims are not permitted to arrange their haj travel privately and must pay the state the large sum of 9,600,000 Soms for organisation of the pilgrimage, including travel, hotel, food and medical insurance, Deputy Head of the Muslim Board Mansurov told Forum 18 on 16 September. He could not give a breakdown of how this figure is calculated. (The official minimum monthly wage is 130,240 Soms, about 400 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 50 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate.)

Asked why the state must control every part of the pilgrimage and who goes on it, and whether this is a violation of pilgrims' freedom of religion or belief, Mansurov denied this. "It is better if it is organised by the state," he responded, "then we make sure that every pilgrim gets their needs met and that everybody returns to Uzbekistan without getting into trouble."

Sadygbekova of Ezgulik, who together with her husband went on the also state-organised umra pilgrimage to Mecca in 2013, stated that "if we could arrange pilgrimage privately we could spend much less and stay in Saudi Arabia in far better conditions". For the 9,600,000 Soms they paid, pilgrims "only got a cheap hotel and poor food". She stated that it would have been more economical were pilgrims allowed to change hotels and eat wherever they wanted. She added that even the 9,600,000 Soms paid did not cover everything claimed, as pilgrims also had to pay the state-run Uzbekistan Airways 200 US Dollars for excess baggage weighing 20 kilograms.

The umra or "minor pilgrimage" to Mecca is - unlike the haj - not compulsory or restricted to a particular month, but it is recommended for devout Muslims. Strict controls on who may go on the umra pilgrimage are also applied.

Financial restrictions also imposed

Pilgrims have again this year been unable to receive the hard currency they need for the pilgrimage from banks, according to Sadygbekova of Ezgulik, human rights defender Surat Ikramov, and other sources in various regions of the country who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals.

This difficulty of access to hard currency has existed for several years.

This year, for example, state-run banks in Jizak Region refused to give out hard currency to pilgrims, a source in the region who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 September. In early August pilgrims asked banks such as the Jizak branch of the Xalq Banki [People's Bank] to give them US Dollars in exchange for Soms.

Dilshod (last name unknown), the local Director of the bank, "demanded the pilgrims leave copies of their passports and wait for a call". But no call came and no currency was distributed up to the 14 September end of the despatch of pilgrims from Uzbekistan.

Sayfiddin Ismailov, Head of Jizak Region's Administration, on 5 September "gathered heads of banks in Jizak and told them not to give out more than 700 US Dollars to each pilgrim instead of the 2,000 Dollars promised", the source told Forum 18. The source said

they personally knew of 12 pilgrims who came from Jizak Region and the total may be between 100 and 150. The source had heard that "many pilgrims face the same problem".

Pilgrims in Tashkent also similar difficulty getting the necessary amount of hard currency from banks, human rights defenders Ikramov and Sadygbekova complained. Most pilgrims in Tashkent Region were only given "between 500 and 700 Dollars", they added.

Why did state banks not give out enough hard currency?

Dilshod of Xalq Banki in Jizak (who refused to give his last name) on 8 September refused to state why his bank refused to give enough hard currency to pilgrims. "Who are you and why do you ask this question to me?" he asked Forum 18. He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to the bank on the same day and later days went unanswered.

Asked why the Head of Jizak Administration Ismailov instructed banks not to give out more than 700 US dollars, his Assistant Burabay (who would not give his last name) told Forum 18 on 8 September that he is "surprised that the pilgrims did not ask Ismailov but told Forum 18".

Ismailov through his Assistant told Forum 18 that his Deputy Eshtemir Ismatov is "taking care of the problem". When Forum 18 asked whether this meant that each pilgrim will be able to exchange Soms for up to 2,000 US dollars, Assistant Burabay could not answer.

Called several times on 9 and 10 September Ismatov's Assistant (who would not give his name) told Forum 18 that Ismatov is "busy and not available". He also refused to comment on the case. Told that Forum 18 cannot reach Ismatov, Jizak Administration referred Forum 18 to Nurali Rahimov, Ismatov's subordinate, who oversees the organisation of haj. From 10 September onwards Rahimov steadfastly refused to explain the reasons for the administration's actions to Forum 18.

Uzbek government restricts pilgrimage to Makkah

The number of pilgrims is limited to 5,000, with red tape screening out most people. Ostensibly, the authorities fear the spread of Wahhabi fundamentalism.

AsiaNews.it (18.09.2015) - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Uzbek-government-restricts-pilgrimage-to-Makkah-35355.html> - Uzbekistan continues to limit the number of pilgrims allowed to travel to Makkah for hajj. It also imposes other restrictions, including on the hard currency needed for the journey.

The pilgrimage to Makkah is one of the five pillars of Islam, which every able-bodied Muslim should perform at least once in his or her lifetime.

The Uzbek population is around 27.5 million, 90 per cent Muslim. However, just over 5,000 are allowed this year to make the pilgrimage, the same number for pilgrims from Kyrgyzstan, whose population is a quarter of that of Uzbekistan.

The authorities officially screen all potential pilgrims. Before getting on a waiting list, applicants must present many documents – proof of residence, of good health, a recommendation from the mayor of their city, a certificate of charitable commitment, etc.

Those who are approved are required to respect a precise schedule for leaving and returning. An unwritten rule bans applicants under the age of 45.

However, such rules lead to corruption (favouritism and nepotism for certain pilgrims with connections), and make it harder for most pilgrims to fulfil their religious duty.

In fact, one dejected would-be hajji told Forum 18 says that if things stand as they are, her chance of travelling to Makkah will come when she is 205 years old.

The authorities have not given any reasons for their restrictions. However, it is very likely that they fear that once in Makkah, Uzbeks might be indoctrinated by Wahhabi fundamentalists.

"Threatened we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers"

Forum 18 (11.09.2015) - <http://goo.gl/HH6XAj> - A wide group of Muslims in Tashkent Region near Uzbekistan's capital have faced repeated harassment since the summer, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two Muslim families were initially targeted, with four of them imprisoned by police for between one and two months and about 18 of them fined for "violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings". Another group were then targeted, with ten women detained and fined for the same "offence", while one woman was threatened with being imprisoned with men who might rape her. On 10 August, Anti-Terrorism Police raided the homes of eight male relatives of the women who met occasionally to pray together, discuss their faith and share meals. Anti-Terrorism Officer Mirvolid Mirboboyev "warned and threatened us that we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers", one of the victims Tashkentboy Ergashev told Forum 18. Officer Mirboboyev refused to discuss his or his colleagues' actions with Forum 18. Another Tashkent Muslim, Olmosbek Erkaboyev, was held by police for two months as they sought information about his father-in-law. Officers beat him to try to get him to sign a document incriminating himself on charges of religious extremism.

Anti-Terrorism Police raided the homes of eight Muslim men in Tashkent Region near Uzbekistan's capital on 10 August, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The men met occasionally to pray together, discuss their faith and share meals. Officers held and questioned them for between 15 and 40 hours, warning that they would be imprisoned or tried by a court and fined.

Earlier in the summer, about ten of their female relatives were detained and fined, and one woman was threatened with being imprisoned with men who might rape her. Two other Muslim families were targeted, with four of them imprisoned by police for between one and two months and about 18 of them fined.

In a separate case, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and Tashkent Regional Police "illegally" imprisoned a Tashkent Muslim for two months as they sought information about his father-in-law, who left Uzbekistan for Russia several years ago. Officers beat him to try to get him to sign a document incriminating himself on charges of religious extremism. He was freed, but remains under travel restrictions (see below).

Under Uzbekistan's harsh system of state control over the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief, all religious activity - except by state registered religious communities in approved premises and with pre-censored religious literature - is banned. Those who violate these strict restrictions face imprisonment or often heavy fines. Those detained by police often face beatings and other torture, or threats of torture.

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" in Uzbekistan, the United Nations Committee Against Torture found in 2007. Women seem to be particularly targeted for torture and threats by male officials.

"Anti-Terrorism" raids and questioning

In the early morning of 10 August, eight officers of Tashkent Region's Yukori-Chirchik Police, led by Mirvalid Mirboboyev of the Anti-Terrorism Police Division, raided the homes of eight Muslim men, one of the eight Tashkentboy Ergashev told Forum 18 on 9 September. He and the other seven Muslims - Khumaydullo Abduganiyev, Abdumannon Kholdorov, Imam Khaitboyev, Valikhan Ismaylov, Murat Maymakbayev, Iskandar Kurbanov and Ishdaulet Karabayev - "occasionally visited each other and prayed together".

Police searched their homes, and "found nothing illegal during these raids, but only the Koran for instance in my home", Ergashev added. Officers then took all eight to the Police Station for questioning.

During questioning, Officer Mirboboyev and other officers asked him and his fellow-believers why they visited each other, shared meals, prayed together, and discussed religious topics, Ergashev told Forum 18. He complained that the officers were "rude and swore at us". Officer Mirboboyev "warned and threatened us that we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers." The Police "compelled all of us to sign the Police reports".

Police released six of the men late in the evening on 10 August after some 15 hours' detention. However, they released Ergashev and Abduganiyev only on the evening of 11 August, after some 40 hours. Police warned the eight men that "soon there will be a court hearing" and that they would be fined.

Officer Mirboboyev refused to answer why he and the other Police officers raided, questioned and threatened the eight Muslims, warning them not to visit each other and pray together. He also refused to explain to Forum 18 on 9 September whether or when the case will be referred to the Court. "I already referred the case to Tashkent Regional Police," was all he would say. He then put the phone down, and did not answer subsequent calls.

Asked about the case, Tashkent Regional Police on 10 September referred Forum 18 to Deputy Police Chief Nasrididdin Abdosov. However, his phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 10 and 11 September. Tashkent Regional police officers (who would not give their names) refused to comment on the case or say which Court will hear the cases of the eight men and when.

Officer Mirboboyev was also involved in a raid on the home of another Tashkent Muslim, Gulchohra Norbayeva, in February. Officers were hunting religious literature and also accused her of teaching the Koran "illegally".

Earlier raid and questioning of Ergashev's wife

Seven officers of Yukori-Chirchik Police had raided and searched Ergashev's home in the early morning of 29 June, exactly six weeks before the 10 August raid. Finding no religious literature, officers seized Ergashev's computer, which they have not returned. They took his wife Sabohat Ergasheva to the Police Station.

"In the computer memory there was nothing illegal, only some Muslim cartoons for children and instructions on how to read prayers and conduct other Muslim rituals," Ergashev said.

At the Police Station Ergasheva was "cursed with unutterable words, compelling her to sign police reports against her husband". When she refused to do so, officers "threatened her that she could be given fifteen-day administrative arrest, and put in a prison cell with men, who could rape her," Ergashev complained to Forum 18. "My wife is pregnant, and they did this to her."

Ergasheva was released the same day after seven hours' detention.

Ergashev is preparing an official complaint over the way Police treated his wife and himself.

Female relatives fined earlier

Also during the summer, some ten women – "mothers and wives of some of us" - were also fined, Ergashev complained to Forum 18. They were brought to court under Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2. This punishes "Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies". Each was fined up to five times the minimum monthly wage, 592,000 Soms (1,800 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 225 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Although punishments under this Article are a fine of between 80 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or being jailed for up to 15 days, the authorities "used another Article of the Administrative Code to give milder punishments", Ergashev explained.

"The women were also warned not to visit each other and not to pray together." Ergashev said that relatives do not want the names of the women published for fear of the authorities.

Lengthy detentions and fines

Police officers told Ergashev during his detention that the authorities found out about his and his friends' meetings from two Muslim men they had detained, Fazil and Rakhmatullo (whose last names he did not remember). Police held Rakhmatullo and his son in prison for two months and Fazil and his son for one month, Ergashev told Forum 18.

Rakhmatullo, his son and about eight other family members, as well as Fazil, his son and about six other family members, were brought to court under Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2. Each was fined five times the minimum monthly wage, 592,000 Soms.

As with the group of women who were fined, the authorities reduced the fines to well below the minimum fine under Article 201, Part 2, Ergashev noted. All have paid the fines. The two families do "not want to talk publicly about the cases for fear of further persecution from the authorities."

Arrest, 61 days' imprisonment, torture

In a separate case, on 5 June officers of the NSS secret police and Tashkent Regional Police arrested Olmosbek Erkaboyev, a Muslim from Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District. They "illegally" imprisoned him for 61 days, Tashkent-based human rights defender Surat Ikramov complained to Forum 18 on 8 September. Erkaboyev was eventually freed on 4 August.

The 36-year old Erkaboyev was arrested in the building of the Police Passport Division, where he was supposed to collect his new Uzbek bio-metric passport. He was then taken to Tashkent Regional Police Station. "There he was subjected to illegal questioning without participation of a lawyer, was beaten, tortured and hit on the head with a

truncheon," Ikramov told Forum 18. "Officers demanded that he sign an indictment accusing him of religious extremism."

Erkaboyev's mother Mutabarkhon Sodikova – who sought help in the case from Ikramov – believes her son was targeted because police are hunting for his father-in-law, Muhiddin (last name unknown). She told Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service for an 18 August report that some years ago Muhiddin and his wife had moved to Russia, where they received Russian citizenship.

Several years ago during a return visit to Uzbekistan, Muhiddin was sharing a meal with his Muslim friends when police raided. Police opened a case, but Muhiddin was able to flee from Uzbekistan. Sodikova said her son had been questioned about his father-in-law's religious activity during his detention.

Erkaboyev himself is known to attend mosque regularly.

Released under recognisance not to leave

Sodikova visited Tashkent Regional Police "every day during her son's imprisonment to find out what exactly her son is being accused of", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18. Saidislom Yusupov, Anti-terrorism Police officer "calmed her, telling her that her son would soon be released, but did not tell her why he had been arrested."

Ikramov told Forum 18 that in early August he called Officer Yusupov, who similarly told him that Erkaboyev would soon be released without giving any details of the case. Erkaboyev was then released on 4 August after 61 days' imprisonment. However, he signed "papers that he will be a witness in a criminal case, and that he must not leave Tashkent until the court hearing."

The Police reports Erkaboyev signed claimed that officers were "polite", and that he has "no complaints against the authorities." Officers warned him that "if materials are published on the internet about his arrest, he will be put in prison."

Called on 10 September, Officer Yusupov introduced himself but put the phone down when Forum 18 asked what Erkaboyev is charged with, and why he was tortured while in detention. Called back, one of Yusupov's colleagues answered the phone and as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself, he began mumbling in a language which sounded like a mixture of Russian and English and laughing loudly. He then put the phone down.

Asked about the case, Tashkent Regional Police on 10 September referred Forum 18 to Sherzod Nurmatov, Chief of the Anti-Terrorism Police. Asked the same day about the case and why officers had tortured Erkaboyev, Nurmatov asked Forum 18 to call back in an hour. Called back on 10 September, Nurmatov's cell phone was switched off. When Forum 18 reached him on 11 September, he first asked, "Who gave you my number?" Without waiting for an answer, he suddenly said, "You can write anything and anywhere," and put the phone down.

No soap or toilet paper and only poor food in detention

While in detention in Tashkent Regional Investigation Detention Centre, Erkaboyev was "not given soap or toilet paper," and was given "poor food". He came out of detention "skinny, sickly, and with complaints about his abdomen and heart", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18.

Seeing her son in this state, Sodikova "felt very bad". She asked the Chief of Police Passport Division Farrukh Muminov why her son had been arrested and why, three

months after his application, he still had not got his passport. Muminov declined to discuss the issue with her, saying only that it was an "instruction from above".

Sodikova also approached Tashkent Regional NSS secret police, where she was received by Officer Ulugbek (who refused to give his last name or position). On Ulugbek's instruction, she left a written complaint about the case. Sodikova also wrote a complaint to Tashkent Regional Prosecutor's Office.

Large fine follows police bullying of children

Forum 18 (06.08.2015) - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2087 - Police brought administrative charges against a Protestant pastor near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent after forcing children from a local orphanage to write statements officers could use to bring the case, local Protestants complained to Forum 18 News Service. Although a court handed down a large fine in February, the pastor found out about it only in June.

Police in Karshi [Qarshi] hunting a local Protestant in an attempt to punish her for speaking to family members about her faith have again raided her home. Officers claim she kidnapped her grandson for three days, while a court has fined her niece.

Police in Urgench [Urganch] have confiscated religious literature and a car from a local Baptist. Anti-Terrorism Police accuse him of "teaching religion illegally".

Police often confiscate without due legal process the property of those they target in raids. Another Baptist, Veniamin Nemirov from Samarkand, had his car illegally confiscated in April 2014. On 4 August 2015 Nemirov told Forum 18 that police had put his car up for sale.

Religious literature confiscated from individuals – whether Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses or of other faiths – is frequently ordered destroyed by courts.

Police bullying of children

Police bullied young people into writing statements against Pastor Sergei Rychagov of Grace Presbyterian Church, in the town of Dostabod in Tashkent Region's Kuyichirchik District. The five young people, all orphans between the ages of 15 and 18, live in Special Children's Boarding School No. 46, local Protestants who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 August.

Then Headteacher Shakir Khalikulov gave permission in 2012 for the young people to start going on Saturdays to a private home next to the Church building, where they took baths, were fed, and also worked in the grounds of the Church. On Sundays they participated in the Church's meetings for worship. However, in late 2014 police pressured them into writing statements describing what went on at the church premises.

On the basis of these statements Captain Mirjasur Anvarov of Kuyichirchik Police Station opened an administrative case against Pastor Rychagov.

Pastor Rychagov's Church was in 2012 raided and subjected to state-sponsored media attack, as well as he himself being fined.

Charges

Police Captain Anvarov brought charges against Pastor Rychagov under four parts of the Code of Administrative Offences:

- Article 201, Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies");
- Article 240 (Violation of the Religion Law), 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");
- Article 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity");
- and Article 241, Part 1 ("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").

Rychagov "violated the Religion Law", Captain Anvarov insisted to Forum 18 on 5 August. Asked why he opened a case against the Pastor for helping orphans, Anvarov responded: "I can't tell you about the case over the phone, you need to come to our office." When Forum 18 asked why Pastor Rychagov was charged under Article 241, even though he has religious education and is a Pastor of a state-registered Church, Anvarov put the phone down.

Massive fine in February, Pastor learned of hearing and fine in June

Judge Khakim Malikov of Tashkent Region's Kuyichirchik District Criminal Court heard the case against Rychagov on 27 February – even though the Pastor (who was away in Russia) had not been told of the hearing and so was not present and could not arrange to be defended. The Judge fined him 9,472,000 Soms (about 30,360 Norwegian Kroner, 3,380 Euros, or 3,675 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Rychagov, who remains in Russia, found out about the hearing and fine via his Church only on 22 June, local Protestants who know him, and who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18.

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that the hearing and punishment of Pastor Rychagov were illegal. For example:

- none of the young people's statements were dated;
- the case was registered on 24 December 2014 but the hearing took place on 27 February 2015 – exceeding Administrative Code Article 36's two-month limit for bringing cases to court;
- there is no evidence in the case materials that Rychagov was notified in advance of the court hearing;
- and contrary to the charges under Article 241, Rychagov has a religious education, and his Church is officially registered with Tashkent Region's Justice Department.

Asked by Forum 18 on 5 August why he fined Pastor Rychagov in his absence and with violations of legal procedure, Judge Malikov refused to answer. He claimed instead that Rychagov "ran away and is being searched for". When Forum 18 repeated the earlier question and asked why Article 241 was used when it does not apply to an authorised

person of a state-registered religious organisation, he replied "no comments over the phone" before refusing to discuss the case further.

Police still hunting woman, harassing and charging family

Police in Karshi in the south-eastern Kashkadarya Region are still hunting Guljahon Kuzebayeva, a local Protestant, local Protestants who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 31 July.

Kuzebayeva has been in hiding from police since July 2014, as they allege she talked to family members about her Christian faith. She fears torture during interrogation and possible short-term jailing, fellow Protestants have told Forum 18.

The use of informal physical violence and torture against women and men, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan.

Between 7 and 23 May police harassed and raided Kuzebayeva's relatives and neighbour in repeated attempts to find her. They behaved insultingly, "like hooligans", local Protestants complained. In early July the raids and harassment continued.

At lunchtime on 24 July, Ilhom Yakhshiyev, Fakhriiddin Jurayev and Dilmurod Boboyev of Karshi Police came to Kuzebayeva's home. They told her family that her daughter-in-law Dilnora Boboyeva (no relation of Dilmurod Boboyev) allegedly claimed in May 2015 that Kuzebayeva abducted Boboyeva's son for three days. Local Protestants told Forum 18 that Boboyeva had voluntarily left the boy at Kuzebayeva's home. Police refused to provide the family with any documentation of their claims.

Police officer Yakhshiyev refused to tell Forum 18 on 5 August why police are harassing Kuzebayeva and her family. He then put the phone down.

Shahnoza Berdiyeva, Kuzebayeva's niece, was fined in mid-July "for not obeying police orders", officer Nodyr told Forum 18 on 5 August. Asked what charges were brought and where, he claimed that "I don't remember". Asked why police are harassing Kuzebayeva's family and what exactly she is accused of, officer Nodyr asked Forum 18 to call back in 20 minutes. He refused to answer and put the phone down when Forum 18 called back.

Home raided, car confiscated

Police in Urgench in the north-western Khorezm Region on 20 July raided the home of Stanislav Kim, a member of a local Council of Churches Baptist Church, as two other local Baptists – Mirzabek Kuranbayev and Dmitry Krasnokutsky – were with him, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 5 August.

"Police checked passports, and then claimed that a woman wrote a complaint that Kim gave two Christian books to her brother as a present," the Protestants told Forum 18. Kim had given the man the books at his request, they added. Police then searched Kim's home and car, and confiscated Kim's passport, several books and a notebook from the car, as well as the car itself. Kim's passport has been returned, but not his car.

The officials then brought all three Baptists to Urgench Police Station, and put Pastor Kim's car in the Police Station's pound for confiscated cars.

Detained, interrogated, pressured

The three Baptists were kept at the Police Station for questioning until 1 am the following morning, 21 July. After being released, Pastor Kim and Kuranbayev were that morning

again summoned to the Police Station, where they were held for questioning all day. The 15-year-old Krasnokutsky was brought to the Police Station that evening.

Major Shukhrat Masharipov and Shavkat Bekchanov of Urgench Anti-Terrorism Police demanded that Kuranbayev and Krasnokutsky state that Pastor Kim is "teaching religion illegally", local Protestants complained. Kuranbayev was questioned in Uzbek, a language he does not understand, then at 10 pm sent to a detention centre for minors. He was released the next day, 22 July.

Local Protestants fear that charges will be brought against Pastor Kim under Administrative Code Article 241, Part 1 ("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").

No-one from Urgench Police was willing to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 5 August. Questioned by Forum 18 about the pressure exerted on two Baptists, including a minor, to incriminate Pastor Kim, Anti-Terrorism Police Major Bekchanov responded: "Who are you and why should I discuss the case with you over the phone?"

Tortured till he lost consciousness

Forum 18 (04.06.2015) - In early May, police in Navoi Region of central Uzbekistan stopped four Protestants from various Churches who were travelling together by car from Samarkand to Navoi. "We understood that the police was informed of their arrival in town, and were waiting for them there," a fellow Protestant from the capital Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 News Service on 15 May. Officers at Karmana District Police Station then interrogated the four men, torturing one until he lost consciousness and threatening to rape another. The Criminal Police are believed to have already handed administrative cases against the four to court, the Protestant added.

The driver of the car, Murot Turdiyev, is under constant close police surveillance and his car has often been stopped. Like other individuals prominent in religious communities or punished earlier for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, his name appears to be listed in the Preventative Registry. When they detained Turdiyev and his friends, officers specifically asked if they were listed in the Registry at their home addresses.

A very wide range of state agencies, from courts to health care and nature protection agencies, can put people on this Register, which was formalised in 2014. This subjects them to a variety of police "preventative measures" for one year or more. These measures can include someone being fired from their job and there are many possibilities for officials to arbitrarily keep people on the Register for many years (see F18News 4 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1974).

Meanwhile in south-eastern Kashkadarya Region, the Criminal Police repeatedly visited the home in Karshi throughout May of Protestant Guljahon Kuzebayeva, banging on the gates of the yard and trying to climb over the wall. She has been in hiding since July 2014 fearing possible police brutality and arrest for allegedly talking to family members about her Christian faith. Officers appear to be trying to open a case against her and have issued a summons to the police, a local Protestant who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 25 May (see below).

The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to

publicly discuss their experiences and women are often particularly targeted by male officials (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Cases prepared?

Karmana District Police is believed to have prepared cases under Administrative Code Article 194 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer") against Turdiyev and his three companions, Anvar Rajapov, Khurshid Boymuradov and Khudoyor Mahammadiyev, members of various Protestant Churches from across Uzbekistan. Officers told the four the case was being opened because they refused to write statements explaining the purpose of their travel in the region as well as their religious activity, the Tashkent-based Protestant told Forum 18.

Punishments under Article 194 consist of fines of up to three times the minimum monthly wage or (for repeat offences within one year) a prison term of up to 15 days.

Turdiyev, Rajapov and Mahammadiyev have earlier been punished under the Administrative Code for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. Turdiyev has also faced criminal prosecution. In November 2013, Andijan Regional Criminal Court overturned a fine on Turdiyev for "illegal" storage of religious literature handed down the previous month. The National Security Service (NSS) secret police had earlier tried to pressure him into becoming an informer (see F18News 18 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1908).

"Constitution and laws are for Tashkent, here in Navoi we have our own laws"

Trouble began for the four Protestants on the morning of 8 May, when they were stopped while crossing from Samarkand Region to Navoi Region. The four were travelling in the car driven by Turdiyev. The police "know Turdiyev very well as he was persecuted by the police and other authorities in the past, and fined several times before", the Tashkent Protestant complained to Forum 18. "The police know his car and licence plate, and seemingly they were informed about all four Protestants' arrival in town, and were waiting for them."

The Traffic Police Sergeant who stopped their car in Karmana District produced no identification document or search warrant. He asked the four to produce their identification documents and the registration certificate of the car. He then made the men get out of the car and inspected the car's passenger compartment and the boot. "When he realised he could find no fault with the brothers, he asked them to show the inside of their bags and pockets," the Protestant complained. When Turdiyev asked for two witnesses for the search, the Sergeant became "agitated and began shouting, and said that he does not need any witnesses".

Another police officer in plain clothes then came running. He too did not present his identification documents, but examined the Protestants' passports. Seeing stamps of foreign countries in them, he began questioning the men about who they were, why they travelled abroad, and what activity they were involved in. "Later we found out that this was Lieutenant Farrukh Khujakulov of Karmana Criminal Police."

To the Protestants' demands that the Sergeant tell them why he stopped them and that he show them the Traffic Police's warrant, Lieutenant Khujakulov responded: "I don't work for the Traffic Police. I am a police dog handler." Asked on what grounds a police dog handler stopped their car, and told that he had violated their constitutional rights, he shouted at them: "The Constitution and laws are for Tashkent, here in Navoi we have our own laws."

Then the two police officers again searched the car with a help of a dog, and inspected their mobile phones. When they could find no fault, Lieutenant Khujakulov demanded that the four men write statements about their travels abroad, the purpose of their visits, who they met, and what they discussed. When the Protestants refused to do so, he threatened to open a case against them for disobeying a police officer's order.

After keeping the four at the Traffic Police checkpoint for three and half hours, until 1 pm, Lieutenant Khujakulov called for a police car and took them to Karmana District Police Station.

"Violation of honour and dignity, intrusion into their private lives"

Once at the Police Station, officers interrogated the Protestants, torturing at least two of them. Interrogation was led by Khujakulov and a colleague from the Criminal Police, Feruz Ruziyev, as well as Olim Kunakov, a Crime Prevention Inspector from the District Police.

The officers "dragged the brothers into various offices in the Police Station, where officers illegally demanded that they say whether or not they were convicted before, whether they use drugs, whether they are on a special police register where they live, the lifestyle of their family members and other relatives, what they live on, where and why they travel abroad, and whether or not they have any disease."

"This is a violation of their honour and dignity, as well as intrusion into their private lives," the Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Traffic Police stopped Turdiyev's car on 8 May to "see if he had a TV monitor in his car, which he did", Gofur Namozov, Chief of Karmana Criminal Police, claimed to Forum 18 on 3 June. "According to the new order, cars cannot have TV monitors in the passenger compartment." Asked why the four Protestants were taken to the Police Station, he replied: "Because they refused to sign the police report."

Protestants denied to Forum 18 that Turdiyev's car has a TV monitor.

Torture

When Turdiyev asked why he and his fellow-believers were stopped, Officer Ruziyev punched him in his abdomen and two officers who did not give their names began strangling him. "He lost consciousness and those beasts in uniforms instead of calling for doctors just gave him some drops of valerian [heart medicine]," a Protestant from Tashkent told Forum 18.

When Boymurodov, another of the four Protestants, was brought into an office where five unknown officers were present he told them that he is physically handicapped, and also suffers from asthma. "All five officers began smoking, because of which Boymurodov choked and asked them to take him out for fresh air." The officers "threatened that they can rape him".

Officer Ruziyev introduced himself on 3 June, but immediately put the phone down when Forum 18 asked about the case and why he had beaten Turdiyev. Subsequent calls on the same day went unanswered.

Namozov adamantly denied that any of the four had been beaten and tortured. "We only questioned them about the many visas and foreign stamps in their passports," he claimed. Asked why the police do this to someone inside the country, Namozov told Forum 18: "We also have specialists who can investigate such issues." Asked why

individuals who travelled abroad must be questioned about their travels time and again, he responded: "It is our duty."

The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Passports returned, but did police open case?

The Protestants refused to sign any police reports or write statements. Officers finally released the four on the evening of 8 May after almost ten hours' detention. However, the police retained their passports, and asked them to come back for them the next morning, 9 May.

However, the next day the passports were not returned, and the four were told that they will be held responsible under the Administrative Code for "not writing statements". Police returned the passports "only after about a week", the Protestant told Forum 18. They said they believe that the Karmana Police have prepared administrative cases against the four and may already have handed them to court.

Though Police Chief Namozov claimed to Forum 18 that "We did not open any case," Inspector Kunakov who participated in the interrogation told Forum 18 that "investigation of the case is going on," but refused to give any details of the case.

Police resume search for Protestant in hiding

Police in Karshi in Kashkadarya Region resumed their search for a local Protestant Kuzebayeva. Between 7 and 23 May officers harassed her relatives and neighbour.

Kuzebayeva went into hiding in July 2014 following a raid on her home and faces possible prosecution for allegedly talking to family members about her Christian faith. "She fears police brutality during interrogation and also possible administrative arrest," fellow Protestants told Forum 18 in April 2015 (see F18News 14 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2055).

Every day between 7 and 16 May - at different times of the morning and evening - Karshi Criminal Police Officer Abdukhalil Buriyev came to her home, local Protestants told Forum 18 on condition of anonymity. He asked her relatives where she was, and demanded that she present herself at Karshi Police Station. However he refused to give the reasons for summoning Kuzebayeva or present an official summons.

On the afternoon of 16 May, Buriyev again came to Kuzebayeva's home, accompanied by Karshi Police Department's Police Inspectors, Ilhom Jabborov and Olim Rakhmonov. The officers again refused to present an official summons.

Officials "acted like hooligans"

Two days later, 18 May, seven people - including Karshi Police inspectors Fahriddin Jurayev, Dilmurod Boboyev as well as the Chair of the local Mahalla Committee (residential administration), Hanifa Panayeva - arrived in two cars outside Kuzebayeva's home. Accompanying them were four women who did not identify themselves.

The officials and the four women "acted like hooligans," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "They banged on the metallic gates to the yard of her home with their hands and kicked with their feet, yelled Kuzebayeva's name, and demanded that she open the door." The four women "shouted and named Kuzebayeva with all kinds of uncensored curse words." Police "tried to climb over the wall and enter the yard, but could not."

Then the officials gained access to the yard of Kuzebayeva's neighbor by pretending to be checking her gas and electricity meters. The police climbed over the wall between the two homes into Kuzebayeva's yard. "When they realised that someone from Kuzebayeva's home was filming their illegal intrusion, the Officers climbed back over the wall and hid behind it." From behind the wall the Officers "yelled that they will detain Kuzebayeva at any cost, get her to the Police Station, and find anything to accuse her of." They then left.

Officer Buriyev claimed that "a complaint from citizens was filed to the police against Kuzebayeva," he told Forum 18 on 3 June. "The police just want to question her about the complaint." He adamantly denied that he or his police colleagues disturbed Kuzebayeva or her relatives. "This is all lies."

Officer Buriyev then asked Forum 18: "Why won't she come and see for herself what the complaint is about?" Told that she fears that she may be beaten or tortured in other ways, he brushed this off. "In Uzbekistan the Police never acts like that." Asked whether he also denies the film of the police officer climbing over the wall of Kuzebayeva's house and the swearing addressed to her, Buriyev immediately put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Women are often particularly targeted by male officials with violence, torture and threats (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Official summons after 16 days' harassment

On 23 May - "only after 16 days of harassing Kuzebayeva's relatives and her neighbour" - Officers Buriyev and Boboyev finally brought an official summons for Kuzebayeva, Protestants complained to Forum 18. She was ordered to appear before Karshi Police one hour later, "at 2 pm the same day". The officers "again shouted and demanded" that Kuzebayeva "open the door but then pushed the summons in the door" and left.

Short-term jailings, fines and harassment

Forum 18 (24.04.2015) - Three Protestants are known to have been jailed in different parts of Uzbekistan in March and April for between seven and 15 days to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, local Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. A Tashkent Region court also fined one of the prisoners of conscience - Council of Churches Baptist Doniyor Akhmedov - more than three years' official minimum wage after his release from 15 days in jail.

The two other prisoners of conscience known to have jailed for short periods in March and April for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief were: a Protestant in Bukhara who received seven days' imprisonment for "illegal" religious activity; and another Protestant elsewhere in Uzbekistan who received 10 days' imprisonment for "teaching religion illegally", fellow Protestants who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They declined to reveal the identity of those short-term prisoners for fear they might suffer further state reprisals.

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are frequently fined and occasionally given short-term prison sentences, but Muslims who exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief often face much harsher penalties, including long prison terms. Although six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief

were freed under amnesty in February after "repenting", many more remain imprisoned (see F18News 4 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2045).

Raids, fines, literature censorship

Another Protestant from Namangan, Murodjon Rakhimov, was summoned on 17 April by the City Police and compelled to write a statement against his Church. He was released the same day but officers are thought to be preparing administrative charges against him for violating the Religion Law, local Protestants told Forum 18 (see below).

Raids and fines on members of various religious communities continue. Three courts across Uzbekistan between February and March punished nine members of three different families, who are members of various Protestant Churches. All were fined under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for "illegally storing" Christian literature and materials in their flats. All three families' homes were raided by police and various Christian books and DVD and CD disks were confiscated from them, members of those Churches told Forum 18 (see below).

Fines under Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage for individuals not holding official positions. But courts have in some cases have given much smaller fines, applying other Administrative Code Articles for mitigating factors.

Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution.

Detained for 15 days – but under what law?

On 16 March Akhmedov set off very early from his home in Almalyk in Tashkent Region by bicycle on the 175 km (110 mile) journey to Namangan Region's Pap District. Police stopped him in Ahangaran District, just north of Almalyk, after he gave a Christian leaflet to a passer-by, Baptists told Forum 18 on 20 April. Akhmedov's relatives found out about this only on 17 March. Only after several enquiries by relatives and Church members did Ahangaran Police claim to them on 19 March that Akhmedov was being held in custody for "illegal missionary activity".

Police Inspector Batyr (last name not known) of Ahangaran Police told church members that Akhmedov "illegally" gave a leaflet to a passer-by on the street. "When the Inspector was asked whether there was a court order for his arrest, Inspector Batyr claimed that Doniyor had not obeyed police orders, and that is why he was detained." The Baptists told Forum 18 that while in detention Akhmedov did "not sign any statements or reports, which police prepared and asked him to sign."

Akhmedov was held at Ahangaran Police Station for 10 days. On 26 March, he was moved to a Detention Centre in Tashkent Region, where he was held for an additional five days, Baptists told Forum 18. Akhmedov was "slapped on the face and pushed around a few times the very first day" after his 16 March detention. However, police "left Doniyor in peace, and did not beat or verbally abuse him later," they added. He was fed normally three times a day at the Police Station, and slept on a hard couch.

However, conditions in the Detention Centre were worse, church members complained. "He 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." Akhmedov was freed on 31 March.

Fined over three years' official minimum wage after release

On 1 April, the day after his release from custody, Ahangaran Police summoned Akhmedov and brought him before Ahangaran District Criminal Court. Judge Akmal Pirnazarov fined him 40 times the minimum monthly wage, under Administrative Code Article 184-2. "It is unjust that our brother was deprived of his liberty for 15 days and then given a huge fine, simply for giving out a leaflet on the street," Baptists complained to Forum 18.

Inspector Batyr (who refused to give his name) claimed to Forum 18 on 21 April that Akhmedov had been detained and fined for "illegal missionary activity". The same claim was made to relatives and fellow Church members. Told that Akhmedov was fined not for "missionary activity" but "illegal distribution" of religious literature, the Inspector paused before responding: "Anyway, he violated the law."

Inspector Batyr did not explain how police had discovered so quickly that Akhmedov had offered a religious leaflet to a passer-by.

Asked why Akhmedov had to be held in custody and why such harsh measures were taken against him, Inspector Batyr claimed: "It's all in accordance with the law." Asked what law and what exactly necessitated Akhmedov's arrest, the Inspector asked Forum 18 to come to Tashkent for more details of the case. He then put the phone down.

Laziz Kurbonov, Deputy Chief of Ahangaran Police, also refused to comment on 21 April on Akhmedov's detention. "You need to come to Ahangaran so we can discuss the case," he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 insisted and asked why Akhmedov was deprived of his liberty for 15 days as well as being given a huge fine for giving out a Christian leaflet on the street, he brushed it off. "I have hundreds of cases, I don't want to talk about this over the phone." He then put the phone down.

Judge Pirnazarov and other Court officials also refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 21 April. Judge Pirnazarov's Assistant (who did not give her name) took Forum 18's question why Akhmedov was given such a huge fine for giving out a leaflet on the street and why he was held in custody for 15 days. She asked Forum 18 to wait on the line, but a few minutes later she said that the "Judge cannot answer the question at the moment since he is hearing a case." She asked Forum 18 to call back half an hour later. Called back the same day, Judge Pirnazarov's number went unanswered. Other Court officials on 21 April (no names were given) also refused to comment on the case, referring Forum 18 to Judge Pirnazarov.

"Akhmedov is not intending to pay the fine since he does not consider that he violated the Law," Baptists told Forum 18. "He only exercised his fundamental human right." They added that he has already filed a complaint against the "illegal actions of the authorities and the fine".

Raids, fines

Police have continued raiding homes of various Protestants hunting for and seizing religious books and materials, with courts fining them for the confiscated religious materials. On 10 February a Tashkent court fined Ilmira Ishanova and her two sons, Vagiz and Rustam Ziganshin, for "illegally" storing Christian literature and materials in their flat. They were each fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage or 1,184,000 Soms. Tashkent City Criminal court in an appeal case on 20 March upheld the fines on the three.

On 2 March another Tashkent court fined four members of one family, Ibrohimjon and Yulduz Yusupov, a married couple, as well as their daughters Inobad and Inoyat

Yusupova. They were fined up to five times the minimum monthly wage or 592,000 Soms for "illegally" storing Christian religious literature and materials in their home.

On 23 March a court in Navoi Region fined Dmitri and Svetlana Butov, a married couple who are members of the local officially registered Baptist Church, for "illegally storing" Christian literature in their private home. They were each fined one month's minimum wage or 118,400 Soms.

Police harassment of another Protestant

On the afternoon of 17 April, police in Namangan summoned Murodjon Rakhimov by phone to the local Mahalla Committee (local residential administration) for "urgent issues", local Protestants who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 April. Rakhimov is a member of a local unregistered Protestant Church.

Major Umidjon Jalilov and Lieutenant Madamin Siddikov from the Namangan Criminal Police were waiting for Rakhimov at the Mahalla Committee. "They demanded that Rakhimov write a statement explaining why he attends his Church, exactly what Christian books he is reading in the Church, and whether anyone forced him to become a Christian."

When Rakhimov refused to write a statement, police officers "twisted his left arm, and threatened that they will take him to the Police Station unless he cooperated," Protestants complained to Forum 18. Officers also threatened to open a criminal case against him and keep him in custody. Despite the threats and physical violence, Rakhimov refused to write a statement or sign the police reports. The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to publicly discuss their experiences (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

"Seeing that the threats didn't work, Major Jalilov prepared summonses for Rakhimov and his wife Gulchohra Abdurakhmanova to appear before the police, and handed over the summonses to them," Protestants told Forum 18. They said that they think that the police are preparing a case against Rakhimov under Administrative Code Article 240.

Article 240 punishes "violation of the Religion Law", including by holding unregistered religious meetings or sharing one's faith with others. Punishments are arrest for up to 15 days or a fine of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

Major Jalilov adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 21 April that he or Lieutenant Siddikov abused Rakhimov. asked why police are targeting Rakhimov for attending a church or becoming Christian, he responded: "We're not concerned with whether he should be Muslim or Christian, but that he obeys the Law." Asked why police summoned Rakhimov and what specific charges are being prepared, Jalilov did not say. He refused to talk to Forum 18 further.

"She fears police brutality during interrogation and administrative arrest"

Forum 18 (14.04.2015) - In recent months Uzbekistan's police are known to have renewed their targeting of two women for exercising their freedom of religion or belief – Gulchohra Norbayeva, a Muslim in Tashkent Region, and Guljahon Kuzebayeva, a Protestant in the southern Kashkadarya Region, Forum 18 News Service has learned.

Two more Muslim women were sacked from their jobs in Karshi for insisting on wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Norbayeva – who lost her job as a teacher in 2012 for refusing to give up wearing the hijab – faced police summonses, a house search for religious literature, accusations she was teaching the Koran “illegally”, and pressure to sign statements incriminating Muslim men she did not know.

Asked whether the police or other authorities are still harassing her or whether she knows if a case has been opened against her, Norbayeva told Forum 18 on 7 April: “At the moment they have left me alone. I don’t know if the police opened a case.” An Anti-Terrorism Police officer who took part in a February 2015 raid on Norbayeva’s home insisted to Forum 18 that the search was to hunt for religious literature and that the case is now closed. Severe censorship of such literature, including house searches, is imposed by the state (see Forum 18’s Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Kuzebayeva – who went into hiding in July 2014 following a raid on her home - faces possible prosecution for allegedly talking to family members about her Christian faith. “She fears police brutality during interrogation and also possible administrative arrest,” fellow Protestants told Forum 18.

The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to publicly discuss their experiences and women are often particularly targeted by male officials (see Forum 18’s Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Protestants told Forum 18 that they think that police opened a case against Kuzebayeva under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 (“Violation of the Religion Law”) and 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”). But the police “could not bring her before a court as she is hiding for fear of administrative arrest.”

Punishments under these Articles are fines or administrative arrest of up to 15 days (see Forum 18’s Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Police are known to detain people who actively exercise their freedom of religion or belief after having opened an administrative case against them. Police then bring such people quickly before the courts without proper investigation or due legal process, resulting in punishments for exercising human rights. If the police’s victims are given a term of administrative arrest, they are immediately taken to prison (see Forum 18’s Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

“Special register of Muslims to be watched”

Norbayeva told Forum 18 that during one recent interrogation, police officers told her that “it does not matter now if I wear the hijab or abandon it. They said that I will still be in their special register of Muslims to be watched.”

People who actively exercise their freedom of religion or belief – both Muslims and those with other beliefs – are known to be on lists for special scrutiny, held by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, ordinary police and Mahalla (local district) Committee officials. Wearing the hijab or going to the mosque or other place of worship frequently is enough to be listed (see Forum 18’s Uzbekistan religious freedom survey

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Norbayeva approached the Human Rights Alliance, an independent human rights organisation in Tashkent. "We studied her case, and it is a gross violation of her religious and other human rights," Yelena Uralyeva of the Alliance told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 April. She said her organisation is calling on the international community to "support and protect" Norbayeva, as well as on Uzbekistan's authorities to "restore her to her work" as a teacher.

A source from Kashkadarya, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 13 April that they know of at least two Muslim women from Karshi who were dismissed from their jobs recently for wearing the hijab. The women were also subjected to police interrogation and harassment for their religious beliefs. The source did not wish to identify the two for fear of state reprisals.

Officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, including Press Secretary Shovkat Hamdamov, refused to comment on the cases to Forum 18 on 13 April.

Pressure to abandon the hijab

Trouble began for Norbayeva, a Muslim resident of Parkent in Tashkent Region, in 2008, when she heard rumours that her husband had died in Afghanistan. "He left me and our seven-month-old baby in 2000 and went abroad, I don't know where," she told Forum 18. During this period, police questioned her several times over the whereabouts of her husband. "Officers also warned me not to wear the hijab." In 2008 Norbayeva filed for divorce, and was granted it.

In 2012 the Administration of Secondary School No. 8, where she worked as an English teacher, warned Norbayeva not to wear the hijab. "School officials told me in front of all the staff that either I must stop wearing the hijab - as the government does not want teachers to wear hijabs - or I must leave my job," she told Forum 18. "Otherwise I'd be in trouble. I chose leaving my job instead of stopping wearing the hijab." She signed a letter voluntarily resigning her job at the school.

Norbayeva has been without a full-time job since 2012, surviving by giving English lessons privately. "And I still wear my hijab," she added.

Sadriddin Abullayev, Director of School No. 8, adamantly denied that he or other school officials pressured Norbayeva to resign her job. "She left the job for health reasons," he claimed to Forum 18 on 7 April. However, he affirmed that teachers "cannot wear the hijab to school since an Education Ministry Decree on the official dress code for teachers does not allow the hijab or any other religious apparel." Asked why teachers cannot wear clothes that accord with their religious beliefs, he did not answer. He did not wish to talk to Forum 18 further.

Harassment continues

For some time after 2012, police left Norbayeva alone. "But they began harassing me again in August 2014," she told Forum 18. "They would summon me and pressure me to sign statements against two Muslim men and their alleged illegal actions. I didn't even know them." She told Forum 18 that she knew the men's wives by sight. "We got acquainted through common friends in the bazaar. We greet each other occasionally on the street, but our relationship has not gone beyond these greetings."

At 6 am on 23 February 2015, about 14 police officers raided Norbayeva's Parkent home. The raid was organised by Yukori-Chirchik District's Yangibazar City Police in cooperation

with the Police from Parkent. Officers showed her a search warrant from the Yukori-Chirchik District Prosecutor's Office. However, some of the officers hurried Norbayeva away to the Yangibazar Police Station, while others searched the flat in the presence of her brother and some neighbours.

Why the search?

Yangibazar Anti-Terrorism Police Officer Mirvohid Mirboboyev told Forum 18 the search was conducted "because we were tipped off by the Religious Affairs Committee that Norbayeva has religious books in her flat". He added that "books were seized from her flat and sent for expert analysis to the Committee in Tashkent".

However, Norbayeva denied this. "I counted my books when I returned home, and all the books were in place." She pointed out that the Prosecutor's warrant said that the search in her flat was in connection with a Muslim man (whose name she did not remember) who was in custody, and who allegedly testified that he knew her. The police had pressured the man's wife to sign a pre-written statement which claimed that "Norbayeva lived like a vagabond, and she taught Koran lessons illegally."

Asked on 9 April why Norbayeva's home was searched and why she was questioned by the Police, Yukori-Chirchik District Prosecutor Otabek Abdullayev refused to discuss the case. "You need to talk to higher authorities, if they allow us then we'll talk to you," he told Forum 18. Asked who exactly it should speak to, the Prosecutor put the phone down.

Officer Mirboboyev adamantly denied that Norbayeva is being targeted by the police. Asked why officers pressured her to sign statements against the Muslim men, he told Forum 18: "We only conducted a search in her home." Asked why then on 23 February she was taken to Yangibazar Police Station for interrogation, he did not answer. "The case is over, there is no need to worry," he insisted.

Asked why he thinks the case is over, Officer Mirboboyev responded: "The Religious Affairs Committee sent us an expert analysis that the books found in her home are the Koran and Hadith [collections of sayings attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad], which are legally allowed in Uzbekistan."

Local police officer Aziz Bekmirzayev, who led the officers to Norbayeva's flat and who participated in her detention and the search, refused to discuss the case. "I cannot discuss this case with you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 8 April. Asked why, he said: "It's a secret." He also refused to tell Forum 18 whether a case was opened against Norbayeva or any other details of the Police investigation.

Twelve-hour interrogation, 11 days of heart treatment

After being taken to Yangibazar Police early on 23 February, Norbayeva was questioned there for almost 12 hours with only a short break, she complained to Forum 18. Officers were able to compel another Muslim woman to sign a statement that "I allegedly gave her private Koran lessons, which I never did. It is this woman's husband who in February was given a 15-day administrative arrest in Yangibazar, and against whom I was asked to sign a statement," Norbayeva said. She said that later the man "was freed."

At about 7 pm, she and the Muslim woman who testified against her were taken to Yukori-Chirchik Prosecutor's Office for the police to "complete some formalities for about 15 minutes" and where they were not questioned. They were then returned to the police station. "After that we sat on chairs in the police station hallway until 11 pm without being fed or given water, and then we were released."

The woman "admitted to me she had to sign the statement against me, because police

then released her husband as promised," Norbayeva told Forum 18. "She was very sorry, and apologised to me that she had to do this to save her husband."

The police officers, one of whose name is Olim (last name not known), "verbally abused me during the interrogation and threatened to put me in a psychiatric ward if I did not sign false statements, one of which was against me." Despite the police pressure, Norbayeva refused to sign the statements.

Officer Olim seized Norbayeva's mobile phone and her passport on 23 February. They were not returned until late March, Norbayeva said.

Norbayeva told Forum 18 that "after that interrogation I suffered heart pain and palpitations for many days." On 9 March she was accepted as an outpatient by Tashkent City hospital No. 7 with a diagnosis of tachycardia, she said. She attended the hospital daily for treatment until 20 March.

Police target Protestant in Kashkadarya

Meanwhile, trouble began for Kuzebayeva on 11 July 2014, when police searched her flat in Karshi in her absence, "hoping that they could find Christian books there to punish her," Protestants told Forum 18. However, officers "found nothing illegal."

Soon after, police brought Kuzebayeva's brother and his wife and their 19 year-old son to a police station. "There they were made to sign statements that Kuzebayeva illegally shared her Christian beliefs with them." After this police began hunting for her to punish her under the Administrative Code for teaching religion without state permission.

The officers who searched Kuzebayeva's home and searched for her in the beginning were Olim Gulomov, Bakhtiyor Babayev, and Zhavlon Sharipov of Karshi Police, Protestants told Forum 18. Later Karshi Criminal Police officers Iskandar Zhahongirov, Ilhom Zhabbarov and Chief of Criminal Police Alisher Mahmudov searched for Kuzebayeva and "made her relatives sign statements."

Attempted arrest

The latest attempt to bring Kuzebayeva before the police was made by Aziz Haydarov, Chief of Karshi's Passport Regime Department. On 12 February 2015 he signed a summons for Kuzebayeva to appear before the Department with her passport, as well as a letter from the local Mahalla Committee about her character. The letter reached her address in Karshi on 23 February, Protestants told Forum 18. However, Kuzebayeva did "not appear before the police, and is still hiding."

Officer Zhabborov came to her home at 11 pm on 24 February to "arrest her but could not find her."

Asked on 13 April why the Criminal Police is searching for Kuzebayeva and why her relatives were summoned and compelled to sign statements against her, Police Inspector Timur Hakverdiyev from Karshi Criminal Police responded: "I need to look into the case." Asked whether a criminal or an administrative case has been opened against Kuzebayeva, Inspector Hakverdiyev did not answer. After consulting his supervisors, he told Forum 18: "I cannot say anything." He referred Forum 18 to Aziz Haydarov, Chief of the Passport Regime Department, and refused to talk further.

Haydarov of the Passport Department also was reluctant to comment on why police are searching for Kuzebayeva. "She needs to come to us herself, and we will explain to her," he told Forum 18 on 13 April. Asked why Kuzebayeva cannot peacefully practice her

religion or why she cannot share her beliefs with her relatives, Haydarov did not answer. He repeated his previous answer.

"Pardoned only after repenting and asking the President for forgiveness"

Forum 18 (04.03.2015) - Uzbekistan in February freed six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. The freed prisoners of conscience include sports journalist Hairulla Hamidov and five other Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed because they met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. The five are: Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown). All six had served most of their long jail terms. Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are known to be still in jail, including other Muslims who met to study Nursi's works and one Protestant. The five amnestied readers of Nursi's works were "pardoned only after repenting and asking the President [Islam Karimov] for forgiveness", a source from Uzbekistan who knows the men and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Uzbekistan in February freed six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Other known freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience were not freed, including one Protestant. The freed prisoners of conscience include Hairulla Hamidov, a journalist and sports commentator, who was known for his popular football and Muslim religious radio talk-shows. Also freed were five other Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed because they met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. These five are: Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown). All six were freed under a Presidential prisoner amnesty declared in December 2014, and had served most of their long jail terms.

There is reliable information that thousands more Muslims are imprisoned, usually on accusations of belonging to terrorist, "extremist" or banned organisations, or on other charges which may appear to relate to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. But the nature of the Uzbek "justice system", in which the planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed, makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else - knows how many of these prisoners are guilty of involvement in violence or some other crime, are disliked by the authorities or an official for some other reason, or are "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 (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Jailed

Rashid Sharipov was jailed in 2010 for seven years along with other Muslims who read Nursi's works (see F18News 8 July 2010

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465). Akmal Abdullayev was like Sharipov tried in Bukhara [Bukhoro] but slightly later in 2010 among a group of nine or ten Muslims who read Nursi's works (see F18News 24 March 2014

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unclear) are thought to have been sentenced around the same time.

Sports journalist Hamidov and 18 others were fined and jailed for up to six years in June 2010 (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1465). In July 2013 six Muslims were prosecuted for allegedly meeting in a local teahouse to listen to sermon recordings, discuss religion, and listen to talks by Hamidov. In what the indictment appears to see as an aggravating "offence", Ravshan Rahmatullayev – who was jailed for six years - is stated to have prayed. The other five Muslims were given two to three year suspended jail sentences. Prisoner of conscience Rahmatullayev is still in jail.

"Pardoned only after repenting"

Sharipov, Abdullayev, Rakhmonov, Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unclear) were "pardoned only after repenting and asking the President [Islam Karimov] for forgiveness", a source from Uzbekistan who knows the men and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 13 February. Some Muslim readers of Nursi's works who have earlier been amnestied are known to have had to promise to the authorities that they will not in future exercise freedom of religion or belief, including associate with other Muslims who read Nursi's works or foreigners.

Oppressive release conditions, including making statements on television supporting the state's repression, have been imposed on other Muslims (see F18News 4 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1717).

Sports journalist Hamidov told Forum 18 on 25 February that in future he will "be engaged in sports journalism rather than covering religious topics". However, "if any media organs ask me to write on religious topics I will be available". He said that to be released he had to write a letter of apology to President Karimov.

Hamidov's ability to move from place to place is limited and he cannot leave Uzbekistan "until all the due process of documentation is completed". He does not know how long this will take.

Hamidov stated that before he was released he was moved from his prison in Navoi [Navoiy] to a prison in Chirchik in Tashkent Region for quarantine purposes. "At least 4 or 5 out of 15 Muslim prisoners, who were amnestied and moved to the same prison, were readers of Nursi's works", he stated. Hamidov said that he could not find out their names as "I was only there for 20 days".

This is not the first occasion Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed for reading Nursi's works have been amnestied. For example, Muzaffar Allayorov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov, Yadgar Juraev, Abdukakhkhor Alimov, Mirshod Kakhkharov and Mirzo Allayorov (Muzaffar's brother) were amnestied in late February and early March 2014 (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). Earlier, Alisher Jumaev, Bobomurod Sanoev and Jamshid Ramazonov were amnestied in spring 2012 (see F18News 4 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1717).

Some other prisoners of conscience

Among the other prisoners of conscience known to have been jailed for exercising their freedom of religion are two Muslim sisters, Mehriniso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, jailed for running study groups on Islam in their home. Both were arrested in Karshi [Qarshi] in

2009 and with Shahlo Rakhmonova (a relative of the sisters) were sentenced to up to seven years in jail in April 2010. The trial was conducted with many violations of published law, as often happens in Uzbekistan (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Relatives inside and outside Uzbekistan have been very concerned about the sisters' health, particularly over Mehrinisso Hamdamova diagnosed with a possible cancerous growth called a myoma in 2014 which needs to be removed (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). In October 2014 relatives told Forum 18: "Their health seems to be a little better now. Mehrinisso has not been operated on yet, but she was given some medicines. She said she is feeling a little better at the moment" (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941).

Relatives, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 February 2015 that: "Zulhumor is doing well, but Mehrinisso is ailing from her myoma although she has not experienced bad pains recently". Conditions in labour camps such as the one the Hamdamovas are held in can be harsh, with unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, beatings by guards, and criminal gangs having a ruthless hold over other prisoners (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982)

A relative of the sisters, prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov is on a 16-year jail term from June 2013 for following Islam after Kazakhstan illegally extradited him to Uzbekistan. It appears that the Uzbek authorities tried to infect him with the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis. The authorities have claimed to Forum 18 that he is cured - but if so Forum 18 notes this has taken an unusually short length of time. A relative wondered what the authorities' reasons were. "If he did not have TB why was he moved to the TB prison - and if he did why was he moved back to his original prison in such a short time?", the relative asked (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

The only currently known non-Muslim prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief is a Baptist, Tohar Haydarov. He is serving a 10-year sentence from March 2010 on alleged drugs charges, which his fellow church members insist were fabricated. Appeals against the conviction and sentence to the Supreme Court have been rejected (see F18News 2 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1600).

Fellow Baptists from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 23 February that they have visited him regularly several times a year, and "that he is physically fine". Haydarov appealed to be pardoned in 2014, but this was not granted as according to the prison authorities he had allegedly violated prison regulations. However, Baptists told Forum 18 that they hope that he will be released after he has served half his sentence in 2016.

Other Muslims jailed for reading Nursi's works

As noted above many Muslims have been jailed in Uzbekistan, although the reasons for their being jailed are unclear. Sports journalist Hamidov told Forum 18 that in his prison "about 100 or 150 out of the total of 2,000 prisoners were arrested on religious grounds. Some said they were Wahhabis, some Nursi readers, some were named Jihadists."

An expert from Uzbekistan, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum on 26 February that he thinks around 100 Muslim readers of Nursi's works were jailed between about 2007 and 2010. Some of these prisoners of conscience are known to be still in jail, including:

- Ikrom Merajov and Botir Tukhtamurodov jailed for nine years and six years respectively in April 2009 (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1209);

- Nutfullo Aminov and Ilkhom Rajabov jailed for eight years and seven years respectively in June 2010, along with Kamol Odilov and Anvar Zaripov who were jailed for six years each (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465);

- and Abdullo Rasulov jailed in 2010 along with Abdullayev who has now been amnestied (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941).

No comment

The Deputy for Organisational Issues (who would not give his name) of Erkin Bobokulov, Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments in the capital Tashkent, which oversees prisons, told Forum 18 on 26 February Bobokulov is "not available and out of the office". He refused to answer any questions relating to the amnestied prisoners or other matters.

Officials from the government's Religious Affairs Committee also on 26 February refused to comment on the amnesties. The Press Secretary Shovkat Khamdamov claimed that "I do not have that information" and refused to speak further.

Prayer in one jail possible

Prisoners in labour camps and jails are denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to pray openly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from religious clergy (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

A source from Uzbekistan, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the released Muslims they know who read Nursi's works could not openly pray, read the Koran or talk about religion with others while in prison. "All that is banned in Uzbekistan's prisons", they stated.

However, sports journalist Hamidov stated that he personally could pray and read religious books in his prison in Navoi. "There were other Muslims arrested on religious grounds in my prison and they could also pray," he said.

Hamidov said that he lived in a barrack with 60 convicts but that there were other rooms for 10-15 convicts. He said that the "food and other conditions were acceptable."

Torture, death

The United Nations (UN) Committee Against Torture found in 2007 that torture in Uzbekistan is "routine". In November 2013 the Committee reiterated its concerns, including over rape threats against the Hamdamova sisters. "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," (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

This may lead to the death of prisoners. For example, it is unclear why Nilufar Rahimjanova died on about 13 September 2014 in the women's labour camp near Tashkent. Relatives say the mother of four was imprisoned for 10 years to punish her

Iran-based husband and her Tajikistan-based father, both Muslim theologians the Uzbek authorities do not like. She died three years into her sentence (see F18News 22 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2007).

Women such as the Hamdamova sisters seem to be particularly targeted for torture and threats by male officials (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

One of 29 Uzbek refugees deported back to Uzbekistan by Kazakhstan against their will – and against international law – has told relatives of being tortured in Uzbek prisons. The men were extradited back to Uzbekistan in 2011 and all were detained. Most were given long prison sentences (see F18News 8 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1833).

Action des Chrétien pour l'Abolition de la Torture (ACAT) – which represents the 29 men – noted many are still in detention. In December 2012 ACAT published a translation of letters from relatives documenting forms of torture experienced by prisoners in Uzbekistan (see F18News 8 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1975).

Detention, fine, literature confiscation was "hospitality we got for bringing mandarins"

Forum 18 (11.02.2015) - After more than two months living under restrictions, one of two Russian lorry drivers was fined for "illegally" importing religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has learned. On 5 February, both were deported from Uzbekistan. The two were detained and confined near Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic in northwestern Uzbekistan as the criminal case proceeded. Nurullo Zhamolov, Chair of Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department, claimed to Forum 18 on 11 February that "no-one should be fined or punished" for importing a Koran, Bible or other "legally allowed" religious literature into Uzbekistan. However, he was unable to say why the lorry drivers were held for more than two months and one fined for having religious literature.

Asked whether he does not think Uzbekistan's strict restrictions on the import, production, storage and distribution of religious literature are in violation of its international religious freedom commitments, Zhamolov refused to comment. "Our role is only to give an expert analysis of confiscated religious literature when the authorities ask us. We can't do much when Prosecutors take action or the Courts punish individuals."

Karakalpakstan's authorities also in 2014 handed down large fines on at least two local Muslim men for importing Islamic literature printed in neighbouring Kazakhstan. They confiscated the books, after the home of at least one of them was raided, a local state-sponsored newspaper also reported. Asked why the authorities fined one of them for possessing the Koran and two books of Hadith, collections of sayings attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad, Zhamolov claimed: "I don't know the details of the case" (see below).

Meanwhile, in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent numerous homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were raided between September 2014 and January 2015. At least 10 people were fined for "illegally" storing religious books in their homes as well as meeting for worship without state permission (see below). Police and secret police officers frequently raid religious meetings in private homes. Religious literature is frequently seized in such raids, as well as by customs officials on the border and at airports. Penalties – often heavy – frequently follow (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Customs seize two Islamic books and three mobile phones

Trouble began for the two Russian lorry drivers, 39-year old Magomedsayid Khasayev and his 21-year old nephew Alisultan Abakarov, when they crossed into Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan on 28 November 2014, Khasayev told Forum 18 on 10 February 2015. The two were detained at Uzbekistan's Daud-Ata customs checkpoint in Kungrad [Qunghirot] District of Karakalpakstan.

Khasayev was transporting mandarins from Georgia to Urgench in Uzbekistan. He took his nephew Abakarov with him so he could make a pilgrimage to historical Muslim sites in Bukhara and Samarkand.

Officers seized two Arabic-language Muslim books published in the Lebanese capital Beirut: "Al-Mutamad" (Those who Depend on Allah) by Muhammad az-Zuhayli and "Sirazhulvazh" (Burning Light) by Muhammad Zuhri. Khasayev told Forum 18 that he had bought the books in an Islamic shop in Makhachkala, the capital of his native Dagestan in Russia's North Caucasus.

"When the customs officers asked if we had any religious books or materials with us, I immediately handed over my two Islamic books, which I took with me to read during the journey," Khasayev explained to Forum 18. "But when I handed over my books, they also wanted to see our mobile phones, and found Islamic songs and sermons on them."

The officials then told Khasayev and Abakarov that they "illegally smuggled religious materials into Uzbekistan," which also is indicated in the subsequent Court decision. However, Khasayev explained that his nephew Abakarov had not mentioned the songs and sermons on his phones in the customs declaration "because he did not know Uzbekistan's Laws".

According to the court decision (seen by Forum 18) Khat Saparbekov, Customs Officer at the Daut-Ata border crossing point confiscated the two Islamic books and three mobile phones from Khasayev and Abakarov. They opened a preliminary customs investigation against the two under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1, which punishes "smuggling".

Police drop charges against one

On 29 November 2014, the day after the detained the two men, customs officials handed the criminal case to Nukus police. They ordered the two men not to leave Uzbekistan while the investigation proceeded. They said the case would be brought before the court after the "expert analysis" of the confiscated religious materials, which were sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent.

"At first one Investigator was leading the cases, and he questioned me as well as my nephew," Khasayev told Forum 18. "But then Investigator Major Adilbek Utegenov, to whom the cases were handed, cancelled my case, and told me that I had not violated anything as I turned in the books immediately at the border." However, the criminal case against Abakarov proceeded for allegedly smuggling religious materials into Uzbekistan on his mobile phones. The trial was held in Nukus, Karakalpakstan's capital.

Fined and freed after 67 days

On 26 January 2015, Judge Sultan Atamuratov of Nukus City Criminal Court found Abakarov guilty under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1 and Article 57. The Judge fined

him 50 times the minimum monthly wage or 5,381,750 Soms (16,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,900 Euros or 2,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Punishments under Article 246, Part 1 (smuggling) range between five and seven years' imprisonment for, among others, smuggling religious materials propagating "religious extremism". However, according to Article 57 (imposition of a more lenient penalty) imposition of a penalty below the minimum specified in a particular Article is possible in special circumstances.

In deciding to fine Abakarov instead of imprisoning him, Judge Atamuratov took into consideration the positive letters sent on his behalf by officials and Dagestan's chief mufti, the fact that he is a fifth-year student of Dagestan State University, and that he was not previously convicted of a crime, the court decision noted.

The court decision makes no reference to the advocacy on the two men's behalf by the Russian human rights group Memorial (which lobbied Russia's Foreign Ministry and the Russian Consulate in Uzbekistan) and coverage by the North Caucasus news website Kavpolit and Radio Free Europe.

The Court decision also notes that Khasayev did "not mention in the customs declaration about the religious books." Though Judge Atamuratov's decision indicates that the Religious Affairs Committee's "expert analysis" claimed the materials found on Abakarov's phones propagate "extremism and the ideas of jihad", it does not specify what the "expert analysis" of the books said.

Judge Atamuratov ordered the destruction of the mobile phones and the transfer of the books to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent.

The uncle and nephew were freed from their restrictions – after 67 days – only after Abakarov paid the fine on 30 January, the day he received the verdict, Khasayev told Forum 18. Nukus Police returned the two men's passports on 4 February, and they left Uzbekistan on the night between 4 and 5 February.

Major Utegenov insisted to Forum 18 on 11 February that Khasayev and Abakarov were "not under arrest" as the criminal case proceeded. Asked why charges had not been dropped against Abakarov as they had been against Khasayev, he responded: "I cannot answer such questions over the phone." Forum 18 asked why Abakarov – who was not familiar with Uzbek legal restrictions on religious materials – was punished, and whether he could not have been warned for the first time. Utegenov repeated his previous answer and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing.

Nukus City Court officials (who did not give their names) both from the Chancellery's office and reception of the Court's Chairman on 11 February refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Judge Atamuratov or any other officials.

On 30 November 2014, customs officials had accompanied Khasayev's lorry to Urgench customs checkpoint, to the final destination of the delivery of the goods. "There together with Urgench customs, they broke the seal and inspected the goods," Khasayev told Forum 18. "After being assured that we had indeed transported mandarins, they released the cargo. We then delivered and received payment for the goods."

However, the customs officials in Urgench demanded that the lorry remain in the town until the criminal case concluded. "We decided that we would rent a place in Urgench so we could watch the lorry, and my nephew Alisultan would travel between Urgench and Nukus for his case." Khasayev said that Abakarov made numerous trips by taxi between Urgench and Nukus – a journey of 165 kms (100 miles) – in the two months when the case was under investigation and in the court.

"We lost more than 6,000 Dollars"

"We lost more than 6,000 (US) Dollars of our personal money in Uzbekistan, which we spent on rent of a flat, taxis and food, including 400 Dollars to our lawyer, as well as the fine given to Alisultan," Khasayev complained. "This was the Uzbek hospitality we got for bringing mandarins," he said with irony.

Khasayev told Forum 18 that Yugtrans, the Russian cargo company which hires him as a driver, "will not compensate our loss, but it will also not penalise me for the loss occurred to the company while the lorry stood idle for several weeks."

Other Karakalpak religious literature import fines

State-sponsored newspaper "Erkin Karakalpakstan" (Karakalpakstan News) also reported fines given in 2014 to two local Muslim men for importing Islamic literature printed in Kazakhstan.

On 20 February 2014, the authorities confiscated from Islambek Baymuratov, a resident of Nukus, Said bin Ali bin Waqf al-Qahtani's "Fortress of a Muslim", an Islamic collection of prayers published in Kazakhstan in 2004. Baymuratov was later punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2 (Illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials), the paper noted on 30 September 2014. It did not specify what the punishment was, nor when it was handed down. Maximum punishment for individuals under this Article is 100 times the minimum monthly wage and confiscation of the literature.

In a separate case, "during an anti-terror operation" in summer 2014, the authorities raided the Nukus home of Kuyandyk Ibadullayev, the newspaper noted on 12 November 2014. Police confiscated from him two books of Hadith, collections of sayings attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. One of the collections was by al-Bukhari. Also seized was an edition of the Koran with parallel texts in Arabic and Kazakh transcription. The books were published in Kazakhstan from where Ibadullayev brought them into Karakalpakstan.

The newspaper said that though "religious extremist or fundamentalist ideas were not found in these books," Ibadullayev had imported them in violation of the Law, and he was "fined according to the requirements of the Law." It gave no other details of the case.

Tashkent raids and fines

Meanwhile, in the afternoon of 21 January, 18 officers of the police and other agencies raided the home of Jehovah's Witness Tanzilya Karkayeva in Tashkent's Yakkasaray District, Jehovah's Witnesses outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 6 February. Officers confiscated religious books, copies of the Jehovah's Witness magazine "The Watchtower", notebooks with personal notes, as well as CDs and DVDs. "We do not know the exact amount of the confiscated materials," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "None of the officers presented their documents to Karkayeva, or showed a search warrant."

A court later fined Karkayeva one month's minimum wage. "The case was heard without Tanzilya Karkayeva being in the room - she was out in the corridor of the court building and she only heard the decision from the local police officer," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Karkayeva hasn't even received the written text of the decision. The local believers told us that she decided for personal reasons not to complain," They said they do not know the exact date of the hearing or other details of the Court case.

Another Criminal Court in Tashkent's Yashnobod (formerly Khamza) District on 30 September 2014 fined nine other Jehovah's Witnesses under Administrative Code Article 240 and Article 241, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They explained that they do not know the exact details but that prior to the Court decision the local authorities raided a worship meeting and opened administrative cases against at least some of those present.

Article 240 punishes "violation of the Religion Law", including by holding unregistered religious meetings or sharing one's faith with others. Punishments are arrest for up to 15 days or a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

Article 241 punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines" with arrest of up to 15 days or a fine of 5 to 10 times the minimum monthly wage.

Nailya Gapparova, Zukhra and Nigora Shoakbarova received fines of 30 times the minimum monthly wage. Zulfiyya Shipova was fined 20 times, while Tatyana Tenyayeva, Elmira Adigamova, Alena Shakirova, Rita Mirzayeva and Oksana Kotova were each fined ten times the minimum monthly wage.

"Don't call me again"

Rizkul Jabborov of Yashnobod District's Anti-terrorism Police, responsible for controlling the District's religious communities, refused to say why the Jehovah's Witnesses were raided and punished. "If you do not agree with the official decisions, please file your complaint officially," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 11 February.

When Forum 18 asked why religious believers, including these Jehovah's Witnesses, cannot peacefully gather and hold meetings for worship, he responded angrily: "Please, don't call me on this number again. I can also make it uncomfortable for you. You are an educated person, and I hope you get my message."
