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TAJIKISTAN: "It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence"

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

Hamzaali Pulodov, the religious affairs official in the northern town of Khujand, has defended the criminal cases against up to 17 Jehovah's Witnesses on charges of inciting inter-religious hatred, which carry a sentence of between five and nine years' imprisonment. "When people break the law they are prosecuted," he told Forum 18 News Service. He says books confiscated during a June raid on a flat where they were meeting had "propagandised against the Constitution and incited enmity between citizens", but admitted he has not read them. Prosecutors and the secret police refused to say how many Jehovah's Witnesses face criminal charges and when cases will go to court. Zafar Rakhimov, who is among those facing prosecution, told Forum 18 he believes two or three of their leaders will be brought to court. "Prosecutor Muzaffarov told me that the accusation is based on the fact that we interpret the Bible differently from Protestants. It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence." Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Tajikistan.

Three months after police and secret police raided a religious meeting in a private flat which the authorities have told Forum 18 News Service was "illegal", prosecutors in the town of Khujand in Tajikistan's northern Sughd Region have opened criminal cases against up to seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly inciting religious hatred. If convicted, the Jehovah's Witnesses will face between five and nine years' imprisonment. Defending the prosecutions is Hamzaali Pulodov, the town's religious affairs official who took part in the June raid. "When people break the law they are prosecuted," he told Forum 18 from Khujand on 28 September. "They violated the law by meeting in an unapproved place."

Pulodov put the number facing criminal cases at sixteen, while local news agencies Asia-Plus and Avesta, citing unnamed officials, put the number at seventeen. An unnamed Prosecutor's Office official told Asia-Plus on 24 September that the Jehovah's Witnesses face charges under Article 189 Part 2 of the Criminal Code. This punishes "incitement to national, racial, regional or religious hatred" committed by a group in a "prior conspiracy" with imprisonment of between five and nine years.

The town Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 28 September that the investigation is being conducted by the Regional Prosecutor's Office. Forum 18 understands that Deputy Regional Prosecutor Shavkat Muzaffarov is leading the investigation. However, no-one at the Regional Prosecutor's Office was willing to put Forum 18 through to Muzaffarov or to reveal how many Jehovah's Witnesses are facing criminal cases, when the cases were launched and when they are likely to be presented to court.

Absolutely refusing to comment on 28 September were officials of the Sughd Regional National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, who took part in the June raid and who are involved in the case against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Zafar Rakhimov, a Khujand-based Jehovah's Witness who was not present during the raid but who was interrogated four days later and is among those facing prosecution, says nothing has been given to them in writing yet. "They've said they will launch criminal cases against us for inciting inter-religious hatred," he told Forum 18 on 28 September from the Polish capital Warsaw, where he is attending the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "Although seventeen of us have been threatened with prosecution, I believe they'll bring two or three leaders to criminal trial."

Rakhimov insisted that any accusation of incitement to inter-religious hatred is unfounded. "They have been looking at our confiscated literature to find religious hatred, but they won't find it," he told Forum 18. "However, Prosecutor Muzaffarov told me that the accusation is based on the fact that we interpret the Bible differently from Protestants. It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence."

Asked if he is ready to face possible imprisonment of between five and nine years if found guilty, Rakhimov told Forum 18: "Yes."

The Jehovah's Witnesses across Tajikistan had to stop meeting in the wake of an October 2007 Culture Ministry ban on their activity throughout the entire country, a ban they have tried to challenge through the courts. Their literature too has been confiscated (see F18News 18 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036>).

The June raid on Jehovah's Witnesses and criminal cases

Trouble began for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand on 4 June, when officials raided a small meeting to discuss the Bible held in the home of Natalya Martynova, Rakhimov told Forum 18. Eleven local officials - including NSC secret police officers, Prosecutor's Office officials and the local religious affairs official Pulodov - forced their way into the flat in the town's 12th microdistrict and began filming those inside.

Fifteen of the seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses present were taken to NSC headquarters, where they were questioned for the next six hours, Rakhimov told Forum 18. "One woman in the group who was registered as a disabled person because of a recent head injury was threatened that if she did not answer their questions, she would be beaten and confined for ten days," they added. "She was released nine hours later only because the threats and abuse began to have a noticeable effect on her health."

Both Pulodov and Rakhimov said more than 100 books in Tajik and Russian had been confiscated from Martynova's home. Rakhimov said another Jehovah's Witness home in the town was searched the same day but nothing was confiscated. He said no warrant from the Prosecutor's Office was shown for either raid.

On 8 June, Rakhimov was summoned to the Sughd District NSC secret police, where he was insulted by the officer in charge, who began accusing him and his family of religious extremism and of inciting interreligious conflict. After Rakhimov refused to write a statement, he said one of the officers - whom he identified as Erkin Ergashev - became angry. "He hit me on the head and in the stomach and threatened to imprison me or get rid of me from Sughd Region." He said officers also threatened to detain his wife and three-week-old daughter if he refused to sign a statement.

Rakhimov told Forum 18 he is a Tajik citizen and cannot be deported from one region of the country.

Religious affairs official Pulodov rejected suggestions that the 4 June raid was a raid. "I and the law-enforcement officials merely came and looked," he told Forum 18. He said he could not remember how many officials were present, but did not dispute the Jehovah's Witnesses' account of eleven.

Pulodov said the books taken from the Jehovah's Witnesses had "propagandised against the Constitution and incited enmity between citizens". Asked whether he had read the books in the three months since their confiscation, he said he had not had time. Asked where the books are being held, he said "probably by the law-enforcement agencies", but he said he did not know if this was the secret police or the Prosecutor's Office. Rakhimov told Forum 18 that the Regional Prosecutor's Office is holding the books.

"Neighbours had complained that the Jehovah's Witnesses were violating social order - with some 15 people coming and going from the flat every day," Pulodov insisted. "They saw there were illegal people." Asked to explain how people might be "illegal" and how a private meeting in a private flat to discuss the Bible, the Koran or any other religious work might be illegal, Pulodov responded: "Discussing the Bible is not illegal, but it is against the law to conduct propaganda and agitation for a faith."

Rakhimov told Forum 18 that on 25 September he lodged a complaint about the raid and the possible criminal prosecutions to Zarif Alizoda, Tajikistan's Human Rights Ombudsperson. On 28 September Forum 18 was unable to reach Alizoda, who is also attending the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in Warsaw.

Unavailable for comment on 28 September were officials of the Culture Ministry or its Religious Affairs Department.

Ever tighter state controls on all religions

State controls on religious activity have been growing steadily tighter in recent years. The Supreme Court banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009, a ban which came into force in February 2009. Many members of the Muslim Jamaat Tabligh movement have been arrested in 2009. Many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation (see F18News 12 June 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1312>).

A harsh new Religion Law came into force in April 2009, imposing tight restrictions on the number of mosques that can be opened depending on the number of residents of any location; gives the state the responsibility to appoint all imams; imposes state censorship on all religious literature; imposes a complicated and bureaucratic registration procedure; bans state officials from being among the founders of a religious community; requires state approval to invite foreigners for religious visits or to travel abroad for religious events; and restricts children's religious activity and education. Religious communities that fail to re-register by the deadline of 1 January 2010 will become illegal (see F18News 3 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1279>). (END)

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

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

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

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

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