

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN UZBEKISTAN

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012.

There is one legally registered congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik (Tashkent Region). No religious activity is allowed outside the territory of registration.

Denial of registration. On 19 February 2009, the seventh application filed by Jehovah's Witnesses to legally register a congregation in Tashkent was denied. The main reason cited was the absence of a confirmation letter (letter of guarantee) of the local *Khokimiat (administration)*.

Threatened deregistration. In 2006 authorities deregistered the community of Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Fergana, the second registered community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan. Ever since, the authorities constantly threaten to withdraw the only remaining registration in Chirchik. The latest threat was in March 2012, which the Committee of Religious Affairs justified with accusations about the religious service and the use of literature by Jehovah's Witnesses in the country.

Arrests, Administrative Fines, Detention, Deportation, and Torture

- In 2008 Sergey Ivanov and Olim Turayev, Jehovah's Witnesses, were sentenced to prison for illegal religious activity under Article 216 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code. During their imprisonment they were known as model prisoners. However, they were accused of violating the "prison routine" and moved from the "open" regime settlement to the "general" regime colony, which disqualified them from being granted amnesty. The colony administration and a person from special security services visited each of them several times and threatened them that their terms of imprisonment would be prolonged if they did not renounce their faith. In April 2012, shortly before they were to be released from prison, 23-year-old Sergey Ivanov and 39-year-old Olim Turayev were each sentenced to additional imprisonment on the false charge they had violated the prison routine rules. The prosecutor at the trial requested three additional years for each one. Representatives of the international community were present at their trial. The Judge gave them only four months of arrest starting from January 2012, when they were placed in special prison facilities for the trial. They were finally released in May 2012.
- Abdubannob Akhmedov was soon to complete a four-year prison term (since 23 July 2008) for violating Article 216 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code penalizing activity of unregistered religions organizations. On 11 June 2012, a month before the end of his four-year sentence, Mr. Akhmedov was given a new sentence of two and a half years imprisonment. *Prison officials told him that he would not be released at the end of his four-year sentence unless he renounced his faith.* On 18 September 2012 his cassation appeal of the additional prison term was denied by a Regional court.
- On 10 May 2012, Oxana Chsherbeneva and Victoria Gorshkova were interrogated at the Bukhara city police department for discussing their religious beliefs with an interested person. Several weeks later they and their roommate, Elnora Maksutova, were arrested and their apartment searched. Officials seized three copies of the *Holy Bible*, all of the women's religious literature that is published by Jehovah's Witnesses, and their personal electronic equipment. Immediately after the search, Ms. Chsherbeneva and Ms. Gorshkova were charged under Articles 184-2, 240 (1), and 241 of the Code of Administrative Responsibility for "illegally distributing religious materials and [teaching] religious

lessons without having a religious education.” Ms. Chsherbeneva was jailed for 15 days. Ms. Gorshkova was fined USD 3,338, which is 100 times the monthly wage. Ms. Mak-sutova was placed in a “rehabilitation” center for 12 days with homeless people and prostitutes, during which time she was not allowed to change her clothing. On 12 June she and Ms. Gorshkova were fined USD 3,338 each. Thus, as a result of the two trials, Ms. Gorshkova was charged 200 times the monthly wage.

- On 16 June 2012, Oksana Shcherbeneva, a Kazakh citizen living in Uzbekistan based on her residential permit, was deported following her 15-day prison term for discussing the Bible with an interested person.
- On 2 July 2012, Yelena Tsyngalova, a Russian citizen born and living in Uzbekistan, was detained for discussing her faith with others. On 25 July she was deported to Moscow accompanied by her two teenage children. Ms. Tsyngalova’s mother, an Uzbek citizen who is a pensioner with disabilities and who shared the family flat, has been left on her own in Uzbekistan without the help of her daughter.
- Gulchehra Abdullayeva, 54 years old, is a pediatrician and one of Jehovah’s Witnesses living in Hazaraspa (Horezm Region). On 15 July 2012 at noon, police officers searched her residence suspecting that she possessed religious literature. Not finding any, they handcuffed her and took her to the police station where she was searched and interrogated. The police threatened to harm her husband and her 23-year-old son. They forced her to stand straight near a wall for four hours in extreme heat and with no water. They then forcefully placed a gas mask on her face, giving her a black eye. They pumped air out of the mask to force a confession. A statement was presented to her to sign in which she would admit to illegal religious activity. Ms. Abdullayeva refused to sign the statement and instead wrote her own account of what happened to her. Police officials were furious and repeatedly threatened her, finally releasing her to return to her home at 9:00 pm. On 25 July 2012, Ms. Abdullayeva was tried and convicted by a trial court for illegal religious activity and ordered to pay USD 163, a fine 5 times the monthly wage. Her passport was confiscated, to be returned only after she paid the fine.

A respectful request

Jehovah’s Witnesses respectfully call upon the government of Uzbekistan to (1) grant amnesty to Abdubannob Akhmedov in compliance with the Uzbekistan Constitution and international guarantees of religious freedom; (2) accept registration applications for congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses, eliminating prison sentences for Jehovah’s Witnesses who are found guilty of “criminal activity,” and (3) discontinue torture, illegal home searches, arrests, deportations, and exorbitant fines imposed for practicing one’s religion, which right is guaranteed under the Uzbekistan Constitution.

A delegation of Jehovah’s Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Uzbekistan attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.