

'Peaceful' Uzbek Muslims Jailed

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Human rights campaigners accuse the Uzbek government of falsely jailing

By Galima Bukharbaeva in Tashkent (RCA No. 31, 27-Nov-00)

Uzbekistan is pursuing a harsh crack-down against Islamic campaigners who

profess to be engaged solely in peaceful religious work .

Human rights activists protested loudly last week after 23 members of a Muslim organisation from the Ferghana Valley were sentenced to between 16-20 years imprisonment.

Defence lawyers claimed the government had fabricated charges that the group, known as Insonlik Va Insonparvarlik (Humanism and Humanity), set up a criminal organisation in the town of Kokand, east Uzbekistan, with the aim of creating an Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley.

The lawyers described the sentences as part of both a continuing repression

against people deemed to have unacceptable views, and a government fear

of any socially independent association which might become an opposition

force.

The 23 defendants, packed into a courtroom cage, were accused of

possessing machine guns, grenades and pistols. Some were

charged with possessing heroin and opium.

According to Judge Nizom Rustamov, the accused had wanted to arm the

youth of Kokand in order to overthrow the authorities and replace them with an Islamic administration. They were also charged with inflicting moral and physical harm on local residents.

The court found the defendants guilty on charges which have already

become standard in such cases: terrorism, the incitement of national and religious conflicts, encroachment on the constitutional structure of Uzbekistan, sabotage, the organisation of a criminal group and the illegal possession of firearms.

The Insonlik Va Insonparvarlik organisation was founded in Kokand in December, 1991. The Uzbek Justice Ministry registered it as a legal body. Lawyer Mavluda Yerkabaeva, who represented four of the defendants, said the group never called for an uprising nor wanted an Islamic state.

The organisation's aim, the lawyer went on, was simply to achieve purity in society, speak out against drugs, prostitution and common human vices.

As for the moral and physical harm charge, the defendants admitted abducting some prostitutes in 1992 to carry out 'educational procedures ' before letting them go. They did the same thing with abusers of drugs and alcohol.

"But at the hearings these men and women, who had

received such 're-education' agreed their abductors had been right and that they had since given up prostitution, got married and pursued normal lives, " said Yerkabaeva. " Former drug addicts and alcoholics said the same thing."

The accused told the court they had confessed to the charges under

torture. But Judge Rustamov dismissed this. "I believe the evidence given during the trial was false and the evidence given during the investigation was valid," he ruled.

Lawyer Yerkabaeva declared, "The court didn't admit the evidence of the witnesses nor the evidence of the accused themselves, nor what the lawyers said. They handed in a verdict purely on the basis of allegations of police in the Ferghana Valley."

Weeping relatives of the defendants said even murderers did not suffer such cruel sentences. Fatima Makhmudova, wife of Khamdam Makhmudov who was sentenced to 18 years, said her husband never committed a crime in his life and hadn't hurt anybody: "Why," she wailed, " was my husband given 18 years, when those sentenced for the Tashkent explosions which killed people were given the same sentences or even less?"

Zamira Mamatkhodjaeva, whose brother Shokhid Mamatkhodjaev was sentenced to 20 years, said she believes the accusations to be entirely fabricated. "It's quite common for the Uzbek militia to plant drugs and weapons when they haven't got anything to charge you with," she said. " Why, if they had found weapons on the accused, didn't they present them as evidence in court?"

This latest case seems particularly harsh compared with a case in Tashkent two weeks ago against the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The chief defendant, Murodullo Koziev, was accused of driving a car packed with explosives up to the building of the Uzbek Cabinet of Ministers, then running off and shooting two girls who were out shopping. Koziev was sentenced to 20 years.

Among the latest 23 accused, there were about ten people who had already served sentences, having been convicted in the mid-1990s for the same offences. Some of them served less than a year and one only two months. The latter will now be doing 18 years.

Uzbek leaders resent Western criticism of its human rights record. They see it as part of a hostile foreign plot against Uzbekistan's fight to maintain security.

Last week's sentences are just the latest in a series of prosecutions against religious organisations accused of anti-state activities.

According to human rights organisations, more than 4,000 people have been convicted over the past few years of attacking the Uzbekistan constitution with the aim of creating an Islamic state.

A more pressing problem for Uzbekistan is the activities of armed Muslim militants launching attacks across the border from neighbouring

countries. In late summer President Islam Karimov offered an amnesty to these rebels if they would lay down their arms and come home. Take up of the offer has been low, partly due to distrust of the government and partly due to fear of being executed by their fellow rebels.

It seems unlikely that jailing people who called for a struggle against human vices will bring calm to Uzbekistan. Critics say the authorities in Tashkent really don't care so long as they can stay in power.

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