

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

For Immediate Release

April 25, 2008

Uzbekistan prosecutes peaceful believers

SAMARKAND, Uzbekistan—Practicing an unregistered religion. That was the “crime” Olim Turayev has been charged with. It has a potential penalty of five years in prison. The 34-year-old medical doctor and family man with three sons is the first one of Jehovah’s Witnesses to be charged under Article 216 of Uzbekistan’s Criminal Code. He was also charged under Article 229(2). The trial began on April 21, 2008, in the Samarkand Criminal Court.

Article 216 prohibits the activity of an unregistered religion. Despite repeated attempts to register their religion, Jehovah’s Witnesses are not registered in Samarkand. Legal experts explain that this law was created to combat terrorism. Now it is being used against peaceful believers. Article 229(2) provides a maximum penalty of three years in prison for teaching religious beliefs privately.

This latest move by the authorities follows police raids of 20 homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Samarkand on February 17, and one home on February 19. These raids were carried out by anti-terrorist officers of the Samarkand Police Department together with agents of Uzbekistan’s National Security Service. Following these raids, ten Jehovah’s Witnesses have been charged with illegal possession of religious literature with intent to distribute it, under Article 184(2) of Uzbekistan’s Administrative Code. Lawyers for Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that this law, which was amended in 2006, violates Uzbekistan’s Constitution, Article 31 of which guarantees freedom of belief, and Article 29, which guarantees the right to distribute information about beliefs.

Turayev’s case is being presided over by Judge Azimov, who in 2007 sentenced another Witness, Irfon Khamidov, to two years in prison for teaching religion in Samarkand.

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