

Uzbek Baptist head, two other leaders face 3-year prison term

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TASHKENT, Uzbekistan (ABP) — The head of Uzbekistan's Baptist union and two colleagues face up to three years in prison on charges of tax evasion and teaching children about religion without permission from their parents, a crime in the predominantly Muslim Central Asian country.

Pavel Peychev, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Uzbekistan, was [arrested](#) in July after authorities investigated reports in a government-sponsored news agency about Camp4Joy, a summer camp for children Uzbek Baptists have held annually for several years. Also named in an indictment handed down Aug. 27 were camp director Dmitri Pitirimov and the Baptist union's chief accountant, Yelena Kurbatova.

Teaching children "against their will"

Forum 18, a Norway-based news service that monitors alleged violations of religious freedom, [said](#) it is unclear when the three are scheduled to stand trial, but the indictment accuses them of "intentionally for mercenary ends entering into a criminal conspiracy" to counterfeit statements to tax authorities. It also says they taught children "the religion of Evangelical Christian Baptists against their will and the will of their parents."

The Baptist leaders deny any wrongdoing. Pitirimov answered in court documents that as a recognized religious organization, the Baptist union is exempt from paying taxes. He also said that parents are required to sign vouchers before they send their children to camp, so they know "perfectly well" that it is a Baptist camp.

Observers say the indictment is part of a government crackdown on

religious activity intended to curb terrorism. Along with passing more restrictive religion laws, authorities have singled out minority religious groups — including Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims not affiliated with the state-sanctioned form of Islam — for harassment.

Jailed for feeding the needy

After a deacon of a registered Baptist church in Uzbekistan's capital of Tashkent received a 15-day prison term in April for feeding neglected children in his home, Peychev [published](#) an open letter condemning "increased persecution of believers" and "a wave of arrests and searches" in all regions of the country.

The Baptist leader said the Uzbek government wants most Christian churches "to cease to exist" and accused authorities of "undertaking everything in their power" to limit Christianity in the country to representation by the Russian Orthodox Church.

That sentiment is not unique to Uzbekistan. Police in Azerbaijan fined and ordered deportation Sept. 10 of an Azerbaijani-born Baptist accused of "illegally propagandizing his faith" in his home in the small town of Yalama in the country's north.

Forum 18 [quoted](#) Yalama's police chief, who described Javid Shangarov, who lives in the home with his wife, two children and elderly parents, as a "religious radical" and called it his duty to arrest him. It is the latest in a string of run-ins with the law for Baptists in Azerbaijan. Other incidents have included the convictions of two pastors that gained international attention, including an appeal to Azerbaijan's president by former American President Jimmy Carter, himself a Baptist.

Shangarov's arrest came on the heels of the July deportation of two Jehovah's Witnesses from Azerbaijan for disseminating religious propaganda.

Derek Davis, director of the [Center for Religious Liberty at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor](#) in Texas, said persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, best known in the United States for their door-to-door distribution of literature including *The Watchtower* magazine, is particularly strong in the Commonwealth of Independent States nations that formerly made up the bulk of the Soviet Union.

"Jehovah's Witnesses have demonstrated themselves for nearly a century and a half to be peaceful and law-abiding citizens in those areas of the world where they reside," Davis, a Baptist, wrote in a recent article. "They deserve better treatment in CIS countries and elsewhere."

"Religious freedom can progress only when assaults against established, peaceful, honorable groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses cease," Davis said.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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