

19 December 2007

UZBEKISTAN: Haj pilgrims still strictly controlled and restricted

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5,000 people from Uzbekistan have travelled to Mecca for this year's haj pilgrimage, but Forum 18 News Service notes that the number of pilgrims allowed to travel from Uzbekistan is significantly less than from other countries with a similar Muslim population. Uzbekistan has a record of restricting the numbers of pilgrims and strictly controlling their selection. All pilgrims need approval from local authorities, the NSS secret police and the Haj Commission, which is controlled by the state Religious Affairs Committee and state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate). Also, all pilgrimages can only be made using the state-run airline, Uzbekistan Airways. The amount demanded by the state for the pilgrimage is about 200 times the minimum monthly wage. "Not everyone can go. The list of those banned from going includes everyone the government regards as suspicious," opposition activist Vasila Inoyatova told Forum 18.

For this year's haj pilgrimage, 5,000 people from Uzbekistan's have travelled to Mecca, government-sponsored news agencies have reported, the first pilgrims travelling on 2 December. However, Forum 18 News Service notes that the number of pilgrims allowed to travel from Uzbekistan is significantly less than from other countries with a similar Muslim population. Uzbekistan has a Muslim population of over 27 million people, but China's estimated Muslim population of 20 to 35 million produced, according to the state-controlled Islamic Association of China, 10,700 pilgrims. Russia's estimated Muslim population of some 15 million sent about 26,000 pilgrims this year.

The government has a record of restricting the numbers of pilgrims and strictly controlling their selection (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884). All pilgrims from Uzbekistan need approval from local authorities, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the Haj Commission, which is controlled by the state Religious Affairs Committee and state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate). In addition, all pilgrimages can only be made using the state-run airline, Uzbekistan Airways.

Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights advocate in the capital Tashkent, told Forum 18 that there are a number of reasons why the number of the pilgrims is so small. "First of all the amount of money each one had to pay to be able to go to Mecca was over 2,500 US Dollars [this is the currency the state demands] (3,221,715 Uzbek Soms, 13,950 Norwegian Kroner, or 1,730 Euros), which is far more than an ordinary Uzbek can afford," he told Forum 18 on 19 December. "The amount in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan is far less."

The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan from 1 August 2007 is 15,525 Soms (66 Norwegian Kroner, 8 Euros or 12 US Dollars), so the amount demanded by the state for the pilgrimage is about 200 times the minimum monthly wage.

Ikramov said that Saudi Arabia gives the quota for the number of pilgrims to the Uzbek state Religious Affairs Committee. The Religious Affairs Committee is responsible for collecting payments and the final selection of pilgrims. "I do not understand why the Committee charged people so much for the pilgrimage," he told Forum 18. The Uzbek government may also limit the number of pilgrims under the guise of preventing development of extremist movements, said Ikramov. "Muslims with relatives who have been imprisoned on charges of religious extremism are barred from travelling on the haj," he said.

Shaket Gulomov of Andijan [Andijon] Regional Hokimat told Forum 18 in September 2007 that committees of mahallas (urban districts) determine who can go on the Haj. "Pilgrims write an application to them and they allocate places by turn," he maintained. "All who want to go can do so." He refused to discuss which other state agencies – such as Hokimats and the NSS secret police – are involved, why the state plays a role and why some applicants are denied. "This is an internal state question – it shouldn't be of interest to you."

Tashkent-based opposition activist Vasila Inoyatova told Forum 18 in September 2007 that the Cabinet of Ministers issues an instruction to Hokimats governing how they should approve applicants. "Not everyone can go. The list of those banned from going includes everyone the government regards as suspicious." She said applicants are interviewed by NSS secret police officers who often claim to be from the Muftiate or Hokimat, rather than from the secret police. She told Forum 18 that applicants first have to go to the mahalla committee where they live and gain its approval, before they then present their application to the Hokimat. "This is a very great barrier."

Mahalla committees are the lowest level of state authority, corresponding to a city district, and are a key instrument in Uzbekistan's restrictions on its citizens' freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698).

An official of Samarkand [Samarqand] Regional Muftiate who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 in September 2007 that individuals wishing to go on the Haj must write an application to the local Hokimat and bring it in person. The application is then examined by the Hokimat, which decides if the applicant can go or not. Each Hokimat has a commission that deals with the haj. "They have to decide if the person can afford it – if it is better for them to feed their family than go on the haj." Applicants also need to prove that they are medically fit. The official claimed there were no serious restrictions on numbers. "If 500 people all apply in one place, of course they can't all go," he told Forum 18.

The official said Hokimat commissions are generally made up of 18 to 20 people. "They are educated people, not just state officials. Eight are from the Muftiate, and there are officials from mahalla committees, the Hokimat, the NSS [secret police] and the police. Each year the composition is slightly different."

The Samarkand Muftiate official added that permission is given in a similar way for Muslims who want to go to Mecca outside the haj season on the umra (sometimes called the "minor pilgrimage"). "The applicant writes to the district commission – it's the same commission." He said the state helps umra pilgrims gain their visa for Saudi Arabia.

Inoyatova confirmed that the procedure for umra pilgrims is the same as for the haj. Strict control of the selection of haj pilgrims has also been imposed in previous years (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884).

Forum 18 called the Religious Affairs Committee on 19 December to discuss the Haj pilgrimage. The official who answered the phone directed the call to Zulhaydar Sultanov, the official in charge of haj issues. As soon as he heard the name of Forum 18 he said he could not hear well, and put the phone down.

In the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qorakalpoghiston] the authorities reportedly banned Muslims under the age of 40 from taking part. This continues policies against younger pilgrims followed throughout Uzbekistan in previous years (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884). Karakalpakstan has the severest restrictions on freedom of thought, conscience and belief of any part of Uzbekistan, all non-state controlled Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity being illegal and a criminal offence.

Uznews, an independent news service, reported on 5 December that only 74 out of 112 applicants to the Religious Affairs Committee of Karakalpakstan could go on the haj pilgrimage. It cited a man who complained of being rejected because he was under the age of 40. He says he was told that the Council of Ministers had ruled that no-one under the age of 40 could go on the haj. Forum 18 has been unable to establish the nature of this ban.

Uznews also quoted an elderly woman who complained that she was rejected because the organisers allegedly could not inform her in time what date she should have paid the fee as a result of "the bad telephone lines". Yet another elderly man complained that the maximum amount they can exchange at exchange bureaux in Uzbekistan is 1,000 US Dollars (1,289,430 Uzbek Soms, 5,585 Norwegian Kroner, or 695 Euros).

"We were given a special date and time when we could do a banking transfer from the Central Bank of Uzbekistan to exchange our money. When the time came the Karakalpak branch of the Central Bank refused the transfer of money, saying that they had a bad connection with the Central Bank in Tashkent", he says. The same man further complained that Karakalpakstan should have been allocated 307 places in the delegation, if one compares the population of the region with Uzbekistan's population.

Forum 18 spoke to the Religious Affairs Committee of Karakalpakstan on 19 December. An official who identified himself as Abdurrahmanov, the Deputy Head of the Committee, could not explain to Forum 18 why so few people had gone on the haj from the region. "Why don't you call later and ask the same question to Nurulla Jamolov, the Head of the Committee," he said.

An imam of a mosque in Samarkand told Forum 18 on 19 December that an age limit was not applied in Samarkand region. He also stated that pilgrims had this year been charged 2,500,000 Uzbek Soms (10,830 Norwegian Kroner, 1,350 Euros or 1,935 US Dollars). Ikramov also told Forum18 that he was not aware of any age limitation in Tashkent.

Telephones of the Muftiate in Tashkent were not answered on 19 December.

Within Central Asia, restrictions on the number of Muslim pilgrims allowed to go on the haj are tightest in Turkmenistan. As in many previous years, only 188 pilgrims were allowed to go this year, despite promises by very senior Turkmen government officials to foreign visitors in recent months that pilgrims would be allowed to go independently of the state-organised group which travels in one aeroplane (see F18News 14 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1062). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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

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