

13 June 2008

UZBEKISTAN: "The government is trying to stir up Muslims against Christians"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Uzbekistan's state-run TV has for a second time shown a film inciting religious hatred, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Entitled "In the clutches of ignorance", the film was shown before live coverage of the Euro 2008 football championship, to attract the largest possible audience. The first broadcast of the film made some members of religious minorities then "afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted." A member of a religious organisation not attacked in the film stressed to Forum 18 that members of their community are disturbed "that members of religious minorities are cast in such a negative perspective." A Protestant attacked in the film told Forum 18 after the second showing that "the government is trying to stir up Muslims against Christians." Following the first showing, a Baptist congregation which has been attacked elsewhere in the state-run mass media was raided and banned from meeting. One Baptist complained to Forum 18 that "broadcasting such a film amounts to incitement of religious hatred in our country."

Uzbek state-run television has repeated a film shown in May promoting intolerance of religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This time the one hour and twenty minute broadcast, entitled "In the clutches of ignorance", was shown in Russian, in contrast to the previous showing in Uzbek. The timing of the broadcast was designed to attract the largest possible audience, being shown on the evening of Monday 9 June on the national Sport channel before live coverage of two matches from the Euro 2008 football championship.

The film attacked religious communities conducting unspecified "illegal missionary activities," described as "a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction." The film claimed that Uzbek citizens' "low political awareness and legal culture make them an easy target for the missionaries." Sharing beliefs with others is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, breaking the state's international human rights commitments (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133).

The first broadcast of the film made some members of religious minorities "afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted." However, Forum 18 was told, "people who understand a little bit what's going on in the country sympathise with us." The state TV official responsible for the film could not explain to Forum 18 why he was involved in attacking human rights (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133).

"The government is trying to stir up Muslims against Christians," one Protestant who had been attacked in the film told Forum 18 on 10 June.

One member of a religious organisation not mentioned in the film – who did not want the affiliation given for fear of attracting government attention – stressed to Forum 18 that members of their community have not been directly affected by the film. "But it does disturb them that members of religious minorities are cast in such a negative perspective."

"It was very interesting," one state TV employee who had seen the film for the first time on 9 June told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 13 June. "I agree that each should follow their path – Muslims should be Muslims." Told that members of religious minorities had expressed serious concern about the programme, she responded: "I saw nothing insulting in it. Why do they try to attract people to their faith? They always go for poor people. I agree with the film one hundred percent."

Forum 18 was unable to obtain an explanation from state-run television as to why they decided to repeat the programme. The telephone of Sport Channel director Omon Burkhanov went unanswered on 13 June. The official who answered the phone at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent on 13 June told Forum 18 that he was a trainee and that neither Committee chairman Artyk Yusupov nor deputy chairman Begzot Kadyrov were in the office.

On the Sunday morning following the first broadcast, 18 May, two police officers and two officials from the local mahalla (district) administration again raided the worship service of a Baptist congregation in the town of Gulistan [Guliston] in central Uzbekistan, local members of the Baptist Union told Forum 18. "Some thirty people had gathered for worship in the church's own building," one

Baptist told Forum 18. "The police told Pastor Viktor Klimov harshly to halt the service. They threatened those present and took all their names. They warned the church not to meet there until it gains state registration."

Pastor Klimov was among a number of religious believers in Gulistan highlighted in an article on the state-sponsored press-uz.info website on 15 April as having been punished for their "illegal" religious activity (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1135). The Baptist told Forum 18 that Pastor Klimov had been fined in May 2007 under the Code of Administrative Offences. "The local paper published hostile articles against the church and personally against Pastor Klimov." Klimov has also previously had religious literature confiscated by police (see F18News 12 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=604).

The Baptist complained to Forum 18 that the Gulistan congregation is one of the many religious communities of a variety of faiths across the country that have been unable to gain state registration. Uzbekistan's Religion Law – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – bans all unregistered religious activity and "offences" lead to harsh penalties under the Criminal Code or the Code of Administrative Offences.

"Gulistan is the regional centre of Syrdarya [Sidare] Region and the town has a population of 80,000 people," the Baptist pointed out. "There are more than 700,000 people in the Syrdarya Region yet – even though there are many Baptists - neither in the town nor in the region as a whole is there a single registered Baptist community! These Baptists have no possibility of gathering officially for services and for praying together with their fellow-believers."

The Baptist points out that the congregation has existed for more than fifty years. "During the Soviet period this church didn't have the possibility of gaining registration. It was persecuted. When Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991 the church several times tried to register, but the authorities didn't allow it."

"The raid happened the day after national television showed the anti-Christian film which could encourage great tensions between people living in Uzbekistan," the Baptist complained. "Broadcasting such a film amounts to incitement of religious hatred in our country."

"There is total control on believers who want to hold services, read the Bible and pray," one Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent. "Those in unregistered churches who try to do any of these is automatically outside the law."

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police has stepped up its covert surveillance of religious communities in recent years. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during worship and the recruitment of spies within communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014). (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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY