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UZBEKISTAN: No "need" for Bibles?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

On 8 July Uzbekistan's Bible Society finally learnt that the government's Religious Affairs Committee – which implements the system of compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature – had refused permission for a Bible shipment to clear through Customs, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "This represents a ban on the import of Bibles into Uzbekistan," the Bible Society told Forum 18. The shipment of 11,000 Bibles and Bible-related books in Uzbek, Karakalpak and Russian has been held in Customs in the capital Tashkent since 19 May. The Bible Society says it will continue to press for the shipment to be allowed in. The Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss with Forum 18 why the shipment has been blocked. Asked by Forum 18 whether people in Uzbekistan can read the books they like, an official of the government's National Human Rights Centre responded: "I haven't the right to answer this question." Meanwhile, Justice Ministry officials conducted an extra check-up on the Bible Society's activity from 4 to 10 July.

On 8 July, exactly seven weeks after writing to the government's Religious Affairs Committee for the compulsory permission required before any religious literature can be imported into Uzbekistan, the Uzbek Bible Society finally received the official written rejection of its attempt to clear a shipment of Bibles and Bible-related books through customs. "This represents a ban on the import of Bibles into Uzbekistan," the Bible Society told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tashkent. "The steps taken to block this shipment clearly show this. We do not agree with this decision and will continue to fight to be able to receive this shipment."

The Religious Affairs Committee and the Customs are demanding that the Bible Society now send the Bible shipment back to Russia where it came from. As part of its efforts to be allowed to receive the books, the Bible Society told Forum 18 it intends to write to Uzbek President Islam Karimov asking him to overturn the ban. In the meantime, the Society is worried about ever-mounting storage costs Customs will charge them, even though the Society itself is not the organisation that has required the books to wait so long in Customs.

The import and production of all religious literature in Uzbekistan has long been and remains under severe state control, Forum 18 has found. For the majority Islamic community, even books by renowned Muslim scholars are no longer published. Religious minorities – including Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses – have also fallen foul of the state's tight web of censorship laws and regulations. Both these communities are concerned about literature held for long periods by customs, with the possibility of extremely expensive official charges for "storage" being imposed on small communities (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Officials consistently refuse to explain to Forum 18 why religious literature is required to undergo prior, compulsory approval by the Religious Affairs Committee. The official who answered the telephone at the Committee on 9 July – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 that Committee Acting Chairman, Artyk Yusupov, was not in the office. Asked why the Bible Society was refused permission to import the Bibles, the official responded: "We can't give interviews by telephone." He then put the phone down.

Equally uncommunicative were officials of the government's National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan. Asked about the Bible Society shipment ban, the official who answered the phone on 9 July – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 that Centre official Ikrom Saipov, who covers religious issues, was away on holiday. "Only he can answer questions on this." Asked more generally whether freedom of expression exists in Uzbekistan, the official responded: "Of course." Asked whether people in Uzbekistan can read the books they like, he responded: "I haven't the right to answer this question." He declined to answer any further questions.

The Bible Society also faces intensified official scrutiny: Justice Ministry officials began a sudden check-up on the Society's activity on 4 July, despite the fact that they found no violations in 2007 during the regular check-up all religious communities have to undergo once every three years. "The check-up was completed today, but we won't know the outcome for a while," Sergei Mitin, Executive Director of the Bible Society, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 July. "We just don't know what the outcome will be."

The Bible shipment – containing some 11,000 books in Uzbek, Russian and Karakalpak (a Turkic language spoken in north-western Uzbekistan) – was sent by the Russian Bible Society to the Uzbek Bible Society. The shipment arrived at customs in Tashkent on 19 May. The following day the Uzbek Bible Society wrote to the Religious Affairs Committee asking for permission to receive the books. For many weeks the Committee refused to respond to the Bible Society in writing, but claimed to sympathetic journalists that

the Bible Society had tried to import the books "illegally" (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

In its 30 June Russian-language letter to the Bible Society, seen by Forum 18, the Religious Affairs Committee rejects the import request on the alleged grounds that copies of each of the titles were not presented to the Committee for the required "expert analysis", that no requests from religious organisations in Uzbekistan were presented to show that they "need" the literature, and that the titles of the books in the shipment did not coincide with the titles on the paperwork.

Yusupov, the acting chair of the Religious Affairs Committee who signed the letter, wrote that in view of these reasons, "we do not consider it expedient to adopt a positive decision on your request to receive the religious literature and recommend to take the necessary measures to return it to the sender".

The Bible Society did not receive the letter until 8 July, it told Forum 18. It rejects the Committee's response as "unfounded" and based on "weak" arguments. "The Religious Affairs Committee has the right to ask to see a copy of each title but it failed to do so," the Bible Society told Forum 18. "In any case, the books were available to them in Customs. Secondly, the books were sent not from churches in Russia but from the Russian Bible Society. And they were sent not to churches in Uzbekistan but to the Uzbek Bible Society. We are a separate, legally-registered organisation, so they have no right to demand requests from churches. Finally it is simply untrue to say the paperwork did not match the content of the shipment. Customs checked both the quantity and content of the shipment and agreed that the paperwork was correct."

Despite refusing to respond for some weeks to the Bible Society's application for the books to be released, the Religious Affairs Committee wrote to Tashkent customs – apparently also on 30 June - informing them that the shipment was not to be released and should be removed from Uzbekistan. Customs told the Bible Society the letter was "secret" and they could not pass on a copy.

In the meantime, questioning of the Bible Society's legal status began which led to the check-up held from 4 to 10 July. The Bible Society told Forum 18 that the extra check-up was ordered by Deputy Justice Minister S. Holbaev, though they believe the decision came from the Cabinet of Ministers.

Three Justice Ministry officials arrived on 4 July at the Bible Society offices in central Tashkent and began checking documentation and asking questions. The staff point out that some of the Justice Ministry officials' questions were outside their competence, as the check-up should be confined to making sure that the organisation is acting in accordance with its legally-approved charter.

The Bible Society links the emergency check-up to the Society's attempts to get the Bible shipment released from customs. They point out that no violations were found during the regular check-up, which took place from June to December 2007 and for which the Bible Society was issued with a certificate on 26 December 2007. "Why six months later do they want to do a further check-up?" the Bible Society asks.

The Bible Society was founded in 1993 by representatives of various Christian denominations, including Russian Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. It gained legal status in 1994 and remains the only legal interdenominational religious organisation in Uzbekistan.

The Bible Society reports that it has faced increasing difficulty in recent years importing Bibles and Bible-related books. It says in January 2008 it was allowed to import some 300 books from neighbouring Kazakhstan. "The last time before then we could import any shipment of books was in July 2006," the Bible Society notes. "The government is stepping up restrictions on the import of religious literature."

The Bible Society also reports that book parcels of Bibles and related literature sent to it from abroad by post are routinely returned to the sender by the Uzbek Post Office. "Post office staff in Tashkent do not even inform the intended recipient that they have done this." The decision to ban particular books is taken by the Religious Affairs Committee.

The International Post Office in Tashkent has a regular system of sending all religious literature that arrives by post to the Religious Affairs Committee for it to be approved or rejected. The Committee often denies permission and the Post Office then returns literature to the sender with a standard letter warning them that such literature is "banned" and that they should not try to send it again (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

The state-controlled media have long reported on "prohibited" religious literature seized by ever-vigilant Customs officials. For example, state-run news agency Uza reported on 3 July that Customs officials confiscated more than 6,000 items of "prohibited" religious literature in 2007. In the first half of this year, the article stated, 654 such items were confiscated in 33 separate cases.

The article – which was widely reproduced on other state-run websites – reported the seizure by Tashkent customs officers at the Main Post Office in the capital of 34 CDs and DVDs of a "missionary nature" among material sent from Germany to a resident of the town of Ahangaran near Tashkent.

State TV has recently broadcast programmes encouraging hatred and intolerance of religious minorities which particularly focus on "missionary activities." Sharing beliefs is - against international human rights standards – a criminal offence in Uzbekistan (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

The UzA article also reported how Customs officers in Uchtepa in Navoi [Nawoiy] Region of a car travelling from Tashkent to Bukhara. It said the car was found to be "illegally" transporting books, audio and video cassettes and DVDs "permeated with a missionary spirit". Two IBM computer notebooks were also confiscated. Abduraimova did not reveal how the customs officers had decided to search the car, nor what happened to the three people accused of violating the law.

Forum 18 notes that the cases highlighted in the article date back some months. It appears that the widely-circulated article was designed to remind readers of the continuing controls on religious literature and to arouse popular concern about the content of religious literature which the authorities insist is dangerous. (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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