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UZBEKISTAN: State still stops Muslims making haj pilgrimage

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan is continuing to restrict the numbers of haj pilgrims to 5,000 people, or one fifth of those who could potentially go, Forum 18 News Service has found. This seriously limits the number of Muslims who can perform this obligation of their faith. All pilgrims need approval from local authorities, the NSS secret police and other national authorities, and are strictly controlled – including isolation from foreigners – on pilgrimage. Forum 18 has been told of an unwritten state instruction that pilgrims must be aged over 45. The head of a regional state Religious Affairs Committee denied this, illustrating his denial by saying that his region had sent "a 32 year old man" on pilgrimage. However, he did not answer when Forum 18 asked why there were very few young people on the pilgrimage. The state also charges pilgrims many times the minimum monthly wage to make the haj. An Uzbek human rights defender, Surat Ikramov, pointed out to Forum 18 that this plus the bribes demanded "makes it impossible for the majority to go on haj."

Uzbekistan is continuing its normal practice of seriously restricting the numbers of haj pilgrims to 5,000 people, as well as strictly controlled their selection, Forum 18 News Service has found. Every able-bodied adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime. The 2008 haj from Uzbekistan has already begun, pilgrims departing between 21-29 November, and due to return between 12-20 December. Saudi Arabia, as guardian of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, is responsible for setting a quota for every country whose people want to make the haj. This is set at around 1,000 pilgrims per million residents of a country, giving Uzbekistan a possible quota of over 25,000.

The Uzbek government's persistent restriction of annual pilgrim numbers to 5,000 seriously limits the number of Muslims who can perform this obligation of their faith (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064). Artybek Yusupov, the Chair of the State Religious Affairs Committee confirmed the usual restrictive quota to Press-uz, a state-controlled news agency, on 11 November 2008.

Uzbekistan's pilgrim numbers restriction is not, however, the worst in Central Asia. The worst pilgrimage number restrictions is imposed by Turkmenistan. Here, annual haj pilgrim numbers are routinely restricted to a mere 188 – including members of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

Imam Obidkhon Nazarov, the exiled former imam of the capital Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque, suggested that "the reason why Uzbekistan sends so few people on haj may be that the government does not like people to be religious, or have contacts with outsiders," he told Forum 18 from Stockholm on 4 December. Imam Nazarov had to flee Uzbekistan because of threats to his life.

All pilgrims need approval in a complex process involving the 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). Also, all pilgrimages can only be made using the state-run airline, Uzbekistan Airways (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064).

Imam Nazarov's suggestion, that the state does not want people to have contacts with foreigners, is supported by the strict controls the authorities impose on the haj pilgrims they approve. Uzbek pilgrims are provided with food by cooks brought from Uzbekistan, and given any necessary medical treatment by doctors brought from Uzbekistan, as Press-uz confirmed. A Tashkent airport official responsible for sending pilgrims to Mecca told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Uzbek Service, at the time of the 2007 haj, that each group of pilgrims was accompanied by NSS secret police officers. Pilgrims from other Central Asian states told the RFE/RL Uzbek Service after last year's haj that they observed Uzbek NSS officers trying to prevent Uzbek pilgrims mixing with pilgrims from other countries. NSS officers also instructed Uzbek pilgrims not to give information to others, even telling pilgrims from Tashkent not to take calls on their mobile phones during the pilgrimage.

Similarly, Imam Nazarov's suggestion that the state does not like people to be religious is supported by the harsh controls imposed on all religious activity. This includes very strict censorship of all religious literature, both Muslim and non-Muslim (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Uzbekistan's Shia Muslims, estimated at around 300,000 people, face additional problems, if the government permits them to make the haj pilgrimage. They are mainly ethnic Iranians in the south of the country, and Shia customs are markedly different from those of the majority Sunni Muslims. Uzbek Shia pilgrims have told Forum 18 of difficulties in carrying out Shia rituals when travelling in Sunni-dominated pilgrimage groups from Uzbekistan.

Usman Alimov, the Chief Mufti of Uzbekistan, told Press-uz on 11 November that groups of pilgrims would be accompanied by leaders chosen from among "experienced imams." This adds another layer of state control, as the NSS secret police actively recruits agents from among religious leaders (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014). Total state control exists over the selection, education and nomination of imams (see the Forum 18 religious freedom survey of Uzbekistan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

There is also, Forum 18 has been told by several Uzbek sources, an unwritten state instruction that the age of those who go on haj must be over 45. Discrimination against young people wanting to go on the haj appears to have been in place previously (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064).

Nurulla Zhamolov, the Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee of the north-west Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] region, denied this to Forum 18 on 2 December. He said that there were no age limits imposed by the state, and that Karakalpakstan had sent "a 32 year old man" in its 2008 pilgrimage group. He did not answer Forum 18's question of why there was an absence of young people among haj pilgrims.

Karakalpakstan region operates a particularly harsh policy, as all religious activity that is not either state-controlled-Islamic or Russian Orthodox is banned and a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019) Repression against both minority religious communities and the majority Muslim community in the region continues (see eg. F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195).

Surat Ikramov, an Uzbek human rights defender, stated that he had seen very few young people among the groups leaving for the haj. "Most pilgrims are elderly people, some of them going to haj for a second or third time," he told Forum 18 on 4 December from Tashkent.

Echoing Ikramov's comment, Imam Nazarov also said that he had heard from many that mahalla (local district) committees are reluctant to approve applications from young people to go on the haj. "It is very difficult for young people to get the approval of mahalla committees, even before the state Religious Affairs Committee decided whether or not to give them permission," he explained.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Even if permission to go on the haj is granted, the amount demanded by the state for the pilgrimage is many times the minimum monthly wage (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064). The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (150 Norwegian Kroner, 16 Euros or 21 US Dollars). The majority of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low.

Zhamolov, of Karakalpakstan's state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that every pilgrim has to pay 3,624,000 Soms (19,337 Norwegian Kroner, 2,115 Euros or 2,704 US Dollars) to the state for haj travel. "Maybe some people do not want to go because they cannot afford it," he commented.

Human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 that pilgrims often had to bribe mahalla committees, to get their approval to go on the haj. "Including bribes, each person ends up paying on average 3,500 US Dollars (4,688,340 Soms, 25,000 Norwegian Kroner, or 2,700 Euros) for the haj." (In Uzbekistan, large amounts of money are commonly quoted in US Dollars.) "This makes it impossible for the majority to go on haj," he pointed out.

In line with the low numbers of Muslims Uzbekistan nationally permits to make the haj, the country's regions also have low numbers of haj pilgrims.

Zhamolov from Karakalpakstan's state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that the region – which has a population of 1,500,000 according to official figures - was given a quota of 75 places. "All 75 places were filled," he said. Asked why Karakalpakstan was given so few places in comparison with even other regions of Uzbekistan, Zhamolov stated that this was a decision by the national authorities in Tashkent. "It is due to the lack of people wanting to make the pilgrimage," Zhamolov claimed. He added that in 2004, his region was allocated 100 places but "they could find only 9 people wanting to go."

Sobitjon Sharipov, an official of the national state Religious Affairs Committee responsible for haj issues, refused to talk to Forum 18 on 4 December. "Talk to our International Department, they will answer all your questions concerning the haj," he responded.

The telephone number Sharipov gave for the International Department was not answered that day.

Israil Yusupov of the Religious Affairs Department of Namangan Hokimat (local administration), in eastern Uzbekistan, stated that the region was given 625 places. Yusupov could not say why Namangan – which has a population of 2,300,000 - was given so few places. "The state Religious Affairs Committee decides the quotas," he told Forum 18 on 24 November. Each region has its own Haj Commission, headed by the deputy Hokim (head of the local administration), which checks the individuals planning to go to Mecca, he said (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064).

An imam of a mosque in Samarkand [Samarqand] region, in central Uzbekistan, who wanted to remain unnamed, complained to Forum 18 that only 350 local people could go on the haj in 2008. The region has one of the largest populations in Uzbekistan, 2,900,000. "I cannot say more over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 26 November. "I can only say that we have already sent the pilgrims to Mecca, and they are supposed to return in 25 days."

Ulugbek Yuldashev of the Religious Affairs Department of Syrdarya [Syrdare] Hokimat, near the capital Tashkent, stated that, for its population of 750,000, 150 places were allocated. "I cannot say why we were given only 150 places," he told Forum 18 on 24 November. "You should ask the State Religious Affairs Committee, which is responsible for the haj pilgrimage." Yuldashev said that there are thousands of Muslims who want to go Mecca but they cannot all go at the same time. "Usually people who want to make the pilgrimage are placed on a waiting list," he stated. "When their turn comes up they can start collecting documents." Yuldashev said it could take several years before people can go to Mecca.

The documents necessary for the haj pilgrimage are, Yuldashev said: a passport for foreign travel; medical insurance; a recommendation from the imam of the mosque they attend; a recommendation from their mahalla committee; and "some other papers," which he said he did not remember. "I have not seen or heard of any cases of bureaucracy in relation to anyone wanting to go on the haj," Yuldashev said, when asked if he did not think people had to collect too many documents.

Saidbahrom Gulyamov, Head of the International Relations Department of the Muftiate (the state-run agency formally responsible for controlling Islam), told Forum 18 that individuals must be registered by their mahalla committees to qualify for the haj and go on a waiting list. "I am an ordinary person, and I cannot answer such questions," he told Forum 18 on 27 November, when asked why Uzbekistan permits so few people to go on haj. He refused to say who could answer this question.

Nizamiddin Nurmatov of the Presidential Administration referred Forum 18 to the state Religious Affairs Committee, when asked why so few people are permitted to go on haj. Asked why the pilgrims had to collect so many documents and get recommendations from the mahalla committees, he told Forum 18 on 25 November that: "You should first get accreditation in Uzbekistan before I can answer your questions." (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=1170.

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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