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UZBEKISTAN: Muslims and Christians latest victims of religious literature crackdown

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to attack the sharing of information and opinion in religious literature, Forum 18 News Service notes. In the most recent known cases, contributors to two Islamic religious periodicals – Irmoq (Spring) and Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) – are facing criminal charges, allegedly for distributing information on the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Obiddin Makhmudov of Uzbekistan's state Agency of Press and Information told Forum 18 that "I just found out yesterday from the national TV channel that the magazine's [Irmoq's] staff are suspected of having ties with a banned religious organisation." Baptists are being punished for distributing religious literature free-of-charge, in one case being questioned for seven hours without food or water. A different Baptist has been fired from his job as an electrician, after the NSS secret police and ordinary police confiscated his religious literature from his mother-in-law's flat. Asked by Forum 18 why police raided the flat, Police Inspector Alisher Umarov claimed they were "allowed" to do passport control "anywhere and anytime."

Uzbekistan continues to attack people peacefully sharing information and opinion in religious literature, Forum 18 News Service notes. In the most recent known cases, contributors to two Islamic religious newspapers – Irmoq (Spring) and Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) – and Baptists are being punished for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Obiddin Makhmudov, Head of the Licensing Department of Uzbekistan's State Agency of Press and Information, denied that Irmoq had been stripped of its license. "I just found out yesterday from the national TV channel that the magazine's [Irmoq's] staff are suspected of having ties with a banned religious organisation," he told Forum 18 on 17 February.

Makhmudov said that as his Department has licensed "hundreds of publications," he could not specifically monitor Irmoq articles. "I do not know what they really published," he insisted, when asked what Irmoq articles the authorities objected to. Asked whether Irmoq would be stripped of its license to publish, Makhmudov told Forum 18 he could not say anything concrete at the moment. "We need to wait and see what decision the authorities will make," he stated.

The former Internet provider of Irmoq, bcc.uz, told Forum 18 on 16 February that Irmoq's website was blocked by them because the publication "did not pay their fees." Uzbek internet providers have told Forum 18 that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police decides what websites they block (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941).

Bakhrom Ibrahimov, Rovshanbek Vafoyev, Davron Kabilov, Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev, all of whom wrote for Irmoq, are on trial for breaking Article 244-1 of the Criminal Code. This punishes the "dissemination of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction of individuals, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion in purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and of public security." The same article was used against Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, sentenced in March 2007 to four years in an open work camp (see F18News 23 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=935).

One of the Irmoq contributors - Ibrahimov - was arrested in June 2008, while the other four were arrested in August 2008 by the NSS secret police on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi." According to the NSS, a group of Nursi followers from Kazakhstan sponsored Irmoq's publication. Russian translations of the works of Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi have been banned in Russia, following controversial claims by the authorities that they are "extremist" (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

The import and production of all religious literature in Uzbekistan is under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

The verdict in the Irmoq case is expected on 19 February, the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 on 17 February. Irmoq was the second Islamic periodical publication to be closed down within the last two years, Voice of Freedom news

agency reported on 26 January. Yeti Iqlim was the other closed periodical, and is being accused of co-operating with Irmoq. Verdicts in the Yeti Iqlim case are also expected this week (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Judge Vakhit Sharipov, Deputy Chairman of Tashkent City Criminal Court denied that his court tried the Irmoq contributors. "The case was heard in one of Tashkent's district courts," he told Forum 18 on 17 February. Sharipov refused to say when and where the trial happened. Judge Ismatullo Mamanov of Tashkent Regional Criminal Court also did not want to talk to Forum 18 on 17 February. "I do not know what you are talking about," he said. He then hung up the phone.

Uzbekistan has also been confiscating Protestant Christian literature across the country in January and February, Forum 18 has been told. The authorities are considering whether to bring administrative or criminal charges against the "offenders".

One "offender", Marat Litvinchuk, has already been punished by being on 11 February fired from his job. A member of the capital Tashkent's officially registered Baptist Church, Litvinchuk was dismissed from his post as an electrician at the Uzbekistan State Property Maintenance Agency.

On 1 February, ten days prior to Litvinchuk's dismissal, Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Police had raided the flat of Alla Saakyants, Litvinchuk's mother-in-law. They confiscated Litvinchuk's 67 Christian books, 223 CDs and DVDs of Christian films and sermons, and a Pentium 4 computer hard disk, Forum 18 was told on 11 February by a source in Tashkent which did not wish to be named. Police Inspector Alisher Umarov, who was among those who raided Saakyants' flat, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 February that the police "may even bring criminal charges" against Litvinchuk and his family. Asked why police raided Saakyants' flat, Umarov claimed Uzbek law "allowed" them to do passport control "anywhere and anytime."

The NSS secret police, the source from Tashkent told Forum 18, on 10 February phoned Aidyn Kuliyeu, Senior Manager of the State Property Maintenance Agency and "demanded" he fire Litvinchuk. "Litvinchuk was compelled to write a letter 'voluntarily' resigning."

Kuliyeu told Forum 18 that he "does not know why he [Litvinchuk] left his job" and denied he was called by the NSS secret police. He said he "knew nothing" about the religious beliefs of Litvinchuk, or that religious literature had been confiscated from him.

Police Inspector Umarov told Forum 18 that "the Christian religion is not banned in Uzbekistan. But, we need to check and see if the books and other materials have been authorised by the state Religious Affairs Committee". If the confiscated materials are unauthorised, police "may even bring criminal charges" against the family members. If they are authorised, the police will return the materials he claimed. The Religious Affairs Committee is responsible for the censorship and "expert assessment" of all religious literature (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 on 11 February on confiscations of literature and closure of the religious publications. "We do not give interviews over the phone," said the person who answered the phone at the Committee. He then hung up the telephone.

Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse to register their congregations with the state - also reported of several cases of confiscation of their literature across Uzbekistan.

In the Tashkent district of Mirzo-Ulugbek, Lidiya Guseva and 74 year old Vladimir Musatov, were on 24 January arrested and taken to the district police station. The Baptists had been distributing free-of-charge Bibles, copies of the New Testament in Uzbek, magazines and tracts. The arrests of the Baptists followed a person in plain clothes approaching them and asking "who gave you permission to pass out literature." He then called someone on his mobile phone.

Eight people in cars then arrived at the bookstand, and surrounded it. At the same time an Uzbek man wanted to receive a free-of-charge Uzbek-language New Testament from the Baptists. The plain clothes people from the cars forced the Uzbek man to return the New Testament and hit one of the Baptist's hands, causing the tracts he was holding to be scattered on the ground.

At the police station the Baptists were detained and questioned for more than seven hours, without being offered water or food. Lieutenant Ulugbek Nazarov made an official record of the Baptist's statements and the confiscation of the literature. The Baptists refused to write statements, sign official records, or answer any questions. They were taken from room to room at the police station, where different officers kept asking the same questions: "Who is your leader?"; "Where did you get the books?"; and "Why aren't you registered?"

Police Major Koldirbekov denied to Forum 18 that they had confiscated the Baptists' literature. "We brought them [Guseva and Musatov] in to check the literature they passed out on the street," he told Forum 18 on 16 February. "We returned their literature on the same day, as soon as we were told by the Religious Committee that it was authorised." Koldirbekov also denied that they had kept the Baptists at the station for seven hours. "We had a short conversation with them, and then released them," he insisted.

Major Koldirbekov also told Forum 18 that Hamza District Police were "investigating whether to open a criminal case against the unregistered Baptist church in Hamza district." Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Similar recent actions, by the police and NSS secret police, against Council of Churches Baptists distributing literature are known to Forum 18 in both the Hamza district of Tashkent and the eastern city of Fergana [Fargona]. (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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