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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, fines, more raids, more fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Protestant Christians in Karakalpakstan in north-west Uzbekistan continue to face raids, threats, fines, literature confiscations and court-ordered destruction of religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has been told. In two recent cases in the region, police demanded that Protestants sign statements that they will not associate with other Christians or have any Christian books in their homes. Students in the region and elsewhere have also been put under pressure to be vigilant against "alien for us religious and extremist influences and the impact of inferior 'mass culture' " The unclearly defined phrase occurs in a government programme for 2010, designated "The Year for the Harmonious Development of the Generation". Religious activity by school and higher-education students has long attracted official hostility. Courts in the region continue to order religious literature to be destroyed, including Bibles and New Testaments, and to find those found in possession of these books. Religious literature seizures continue throughout Uzbekistan.

Protestant Christians in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan have complained to Forum 18 News Service of mounting raids, threats, fines, literature confiscations and court-ordered destruction of religious literature. In two recent cases in the region, police demanded that Protestants sign statements that they will not associate with other Christians or have any Christian books in their homes. Students in the region and elsewhere in the country have also been put under pressure to be vigilant against, among other things, what the authorities describe as "alien for us religious and extremist influences and the impact of inferior 'mass culture' ".

The raids, threats, fines and literature confiscations in Karakalpakstan and other regions of Uzbekistan mirror similar recent incidents in the capital Tashkent and the surrounding Region (see F18News 21 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1433).

The latest raids, fines, threats and literature confiscations come as Muslims and Christians have faced or face trials and jail terms, to punish them for peaceful religious activity (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Akhmat Ismailov, Deputy Director of the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan, and officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent refused to discuss this harassment of religious communities with Forum 18 on 21 April.

Threat of renewed imprisonment

On 8 April, police officers in Karakalpakstan's capital Nukus summoned for interrogation Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant who has previously been prosecuted for his faith (see F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195). Officers demanded that he sign a statement that he will not associate with other Christians, or have any Christian books in his home. "These demands were illegal," one local Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Khayburahmanov refused to sign any statement, and asked why this was being demanded. In response, the police told him that all Christians are recorded on file and especially he, given that he has already been prosecuted for his faith. Khayburahmanov refused to answer any of their further questions, despite police threats that they would have him imprisoned again if he refused to give weekly statements pledging not to meet with other Christians. He was freed after three hours, but was told he would have to return to the police station.

Khayburahmanov was amnestied in September 2008, after being held for three months for teaching religion without official permission and alleged religious extremism (see F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195).

Karakalpakstan's tight state-imposed restrictions

State-imposed restrictions on all faiths are particularly tight in Karakalpakstan, and all non-Russian Orthodox and

non-state-controlled Muslim activity is banned and a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019). Students engaging in religious activity in the region have long been a focus of official hostility, and risk being expelled from their courses (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

Officials have continued their attempts to counter what they regard as illegal "missionary activity" among Karakalpakstan's students. Young people from the Region were summoned to a meeting at Academic Lycee No. 2 attached to Karakalpakstan State University also attended by mahalla (urban district) leaders and officers of the police (and possibly also the National Security Service (NSS) secret police), the official government UzA news agency reported on 16 April. The students were warned to be vigilant against a number of unclearly defined issues, including "religious extremism". A film attacking "religious extremism and missionary activity" was also shown.

"Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity" is illegal under Article 240 part 2 of the Administrative Code, a law which clearly breaks international human rights standards Uzbekistan has signed.

Parents whose children attend religious "sects" and mosques, as well as the children themselves, have been the targets of official bullying elsewhere the country. The authorities nationally also use films to encourage intolerance of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Similar lectures to the one at Lycee No. 2 have been held in other parts of Uzbekistan. One meeting in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan, UzA reported on 30 March, specifically criticised "missionary activity". These meetings are part of a government programme for 2010, designated "The Year for the Harmonious Development of the Generation".

The decree approving this programme, signed by President Islam Karimov on 27 January, ordered a series of measures to counter topics including "alien for us religious and extremist influences and the impact of inferior 'mass culture' ", "drug addiction", and "alcoholism". It did not specify which beliefs are considered "alien" or why they should be countered. The Religious Affairs Committee is among the government agencies supposed to take part in the programme.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why restrictions on religious practice in Karakalpakstan are so tight. The telephone of Nurula Jamolov, Karakalpakstan's senior religious affairs official, went unanswered each time Forum 18 rang between 20 and 22 April.

Karakalpakstan Protestants fined

The threat to reimprison Khayburahmanov is the latest incident of what local Protestants have told Forum 18 is increasing harassment of church members in Karakalpakstan. They said that by mid-April, five Protestants had been fined under the Code of Administrative Offences since January 2010 (see F18News 15 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1421).

In one recent case, of which Forum 18 has seen the verdict, Judge M. Berdimuratov of Nukus Criminal Court heard a case under Administrative Code Article 241 ("illegal religious teaching") on 1 March against Svetlana Amanjanova. Although she was not fined, merely being warned, the judge ruled that four confiscated religious books (including a full Bible and a New Testament) and CDs be destroyed. However, the Prosecutor complained about the judgment to the Karakalpakstan Supreme Court and at a new trial she was fined five months' minimum wage, or 188,400 Soms (720 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 120 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates).

Uzbek courts regularly order that religious literature confiscated from religious believers be destroyed, as happened in Nukus in February (see F18News 15 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1421).

Further Karakalpakstan raids and threats

In addition, local Karakalpakstan Protestants say 15 church members have been warned by the Prosecutor's Office not to meet with other Christians or keep Christian literature in their homes. Forum 18 has seen four written warnings by the Nukus District Prosecutor's Office from 9 and 10 March that individuals risked being prosecuted under Article 244-3 of the Criminal Code ("illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature"), which carries a maximum penalty for repeat offenders of three years in jail.

Local Protestants complained that police officers "burst into church members' homes without any reason" to conduct searches. "When they find any Christian literature they immediately draw up a record of a violation," they told Forum 18. "In several cases, police planted Christian literature on church members and then accused them of possessing and distributing religious books." They added that summonses to the Prosecutor's Office to sign statements not to meet with other Christians or hold Christian literature are increasing.

On 1 February, police burst into the home of a Protestant woman whose brother had just died. According to local Protestants,

officers insulted those present, accusing them of "betraying" their faith, searched the house and confiscated New Testaments in Karakalpak and Russian that had belonged to the deceased man. The woman tried to lodge an official complaint the following day, but the police refused to accept it.

In March, Prosecutor's Office official I. Kurbanbaev summoned several church members who live in the Kyz-ketken district of Nukus, Protestants told Forum 18. They too were ordered to write such statements. Kurbanbaev threatened that any of them who would not renounce their Christian faith would be imprisoned. "The religion of our country is only Islam," he was quoted as telling them.

Officials at Nukus City Prosecutor's Office declined on 22 April to put Forum 18 through to Kurbanbaev. They insisted that they could not answer Forum 18's question as to why he had demanded that individuals renounce their faith. "We are an official state body and can only answer written questions."

Kuvasai Baptists fined

Meanwhile, in Kuvasai in Fergana Region of eastern Uzbekistan three Council of Churches Baptists failed in their attempt to have punishments overturned for "illegal preparation, storage, import or distribution of religious literature" under Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

The three – Nikolai Savinov, Galina Tolstosheeva and Olga Rustamova – were originally fined by Judge Sh. Hashimov of Kuvasai Court on 2 February. Savinov was fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,884,000 Soms (7,192 Norwegian Kroner, 905 Euros or 1,218 US Dollars). The two women were each fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 753,600 Soms (2,850 Norwegian Kroner, 360 Euros, or 480 US Dollars). As in many other cases, the verdict ordered the destruction of Bibles and other confiscated religious literature.

On 16 March, in a decision seen by Forum 18, Judge A. Chorakulov of Fergana Regional Appeal Court rejected their appeal.

The decision notes Savinov's earlier prosecutions for religious activity, most recently in August 2009, when he was fined three times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Late notice of punishment

In Karshi [Qarshi] in central Uzbekistan, Protestant Christian Obid Abdullaev only received a written verdict fining him for owning religious literature on 13 April, two months after the court hearing, Protestants have told Forum 18. Abdullaev, a member of the local Council of Churches Baptist congregation, was found guilty on 9 February by Shahrisabz District Court of Kashkadarya Region of violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

Judge A. Rasulov fined him 113,040 Soms (431 Norwegian Kroner, 54 Euros or 73 US Dollars at the inflated official rate), arguing that Abdullaev's circumstances (he is an invalid) meant there was reason to give a fine lower than the maximum. The judge ordered two Bibles and four other Christian books to be destroyed.

Abdullaev argues that the punishment is illegal, and has complained to various state agencies.

Religious literature seizures continue

Uzbekistan also regularly seizes what it claims is "prohibited" religious literature see F18News 1 July 2008 (http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153). During several customs checks in various regions, the Customs Service seized 1,374 religious books and six discs, the country's Milliy Tiklanish newspaper reported on 17 March. It said most of the seized material related to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Officials at the State Customs Committee in Tashkent, which oversees the Customs Service, declined on 22 April to answer by telephone any of Forum 18's questions about how and why it seizes religious literature, and whether such literature is destroyed. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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