

26 August 2011

UZBEKISTAN: More fines, physical abuse and religious literature destruction

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police who raided a Protestant family's private home in Fergana assaulted the husband and confiscated religious literature, local Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. The religious books are being checked and officials are preparing an administrative case against the husband and wife and a family friend. Asked by Forum 18 what literature found in their home was banned, the Police Inspector who led the raid identified the Bible and the New Testament. Courts in the capital Tashkent and eastern Syrdarya Region have handed down fines of up to one hundred times the minimum monthly wage to ten Protestants to punish them for unregistered activity. In both cases the courts ordered that confiscated Christian literature - including Bibles and New Testaments – be destroyed. Officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to explain why peaceful religious activity continues to be punished and why courts order the destruction of religious literature. "I am no expert in those matters, and you called the wrong department," Zulhaydar Sultanov, Head of its International Relations Department, told Forum 18.

Uzbekistan's authorities continue to punish peaceful religious believers with fines, physical abuse and court-ordered destruction of religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police in eastern Fergana Region raided the home of a Protestant couple in late July and are preparing an administrative case against them. The Police Inspector who led the raid told Forum 18 that the Police found and confiscated "banned" religious literature. Asked what literature found in their home was banned, he identified the Bible and the New Testament. Also in July, courts in the capital Tashkent and eastern Syrdarya Region have handed down fines of up to one hundred times the minimum monthly wage to ten Protestants to punish them for unregistered activity. In both cases the courts ordered that confiscated Christian literature - including Bibles and New Testaments – be destroyed. Another court in central Samarkand Region fined a member of an officially registered Baptist Church for "illegal" religious teaching.

Court officials in Fergana and Syrdarya Regions refused to discuss the two cases with Forum 18, while in the Tashkent case the Assistant to the Judge tried to explain away their decision.

Unwilling to talk

Also unwilling to talk to Forum 18 were officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, whose responsibility is to assist the country's religious communities to fulfil their religious needs and regulate relations between them and the State.

Forum 18 tried to find out from Committee officials on 25 August why peaceful religious activity continues to be punished, whether the Bible and New Testament are banned or cannot be stored in private homes, and why Bibles and New Testaments - among other religious literature - are ordered to be destroyed.

The Assistant of Committee chair Artyk Yusupov (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 that Yusupov was busy in a meeting. Zulhaydar Sultanov, Head of the Committee's International Relations Department, refused to comment, telling Forum 18: "I am no expert in those matters, and you called the wrong department." The official who answered the telephone of Sobitkhon Sharipov, Head of the Expert Analysis Department, (who did not give his name) said that Sharipov was not available and he could not answer questions over the phone. "Please, come to our office, and we will give you information," he said. When Forum 18 insisted with the questions, he put the phone down.

Religious literature in Uzbekistan of all faiths remains under tight government censorship. Courts frequently order that religious literature confiscated during raids – including Bibles - be destroyed (see F18News 12 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1569).

Assault during home raid

Police who raided a Protestant family home in Fergana physically abused the husband and confiscated Christian literature, a local Protestant who wished to remain unnamed for fear of State reprisals complained to Forum 18.

On the evening of 23 July, ten officers – three in police uniform and the rest in plain clothes -raided the home of married couple, Muradiljon Umurzakov and Dilorom Mamasidikova, who were entertaining a friend, Ravshan Muminov. The raid was led by Fergana City's Police Inspector Dilshod Ataugliyev from the Crime Prevention Unit, but other officers are believed to have been from the local National Security Service (NSS) secret Police.

When Umurzakov asked the officials on what basis they "intruded and violated their privacy, and asked them to show their identification documents" the Police officers "twisted his arms, and threatened that they could continue physically to assault him," the Protestant complained. "The officers also threatened that they could open a criminal case against him." As a result of the shock, Umurzakov developed high blood pressure and an ambulance was called, the Protestant told Forum 18.

Unlawful search and confiscation

While the doctors were examining Umurzakov, the officers "without the hosts' permission" unlocked his son's room in the house. The son is currently working in Russia. The officials "without witnesses" confiscated from the son's room a Bible, an Uzbek New Testament, a Proverbs of Solomon in Uzbek and a Koran in Russian. All of these have been "authorised" by the Religious Affairs Committee to be imported into and sold in Uzbekistan, the Protestant pointed out.

"We found out later that - in order to cover up their unlawful acts - the Police took an official letter from Akhat Akhmedaliyev, the chair of the local mahalla [residential district], saying that Umurzakov and his family were involved in illegal missionary activity among local Muslims," the Protestant told Forum 18.

Mahalla committees, the lowest level of administration in Uzbekistan, are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control society, including by trying to prevent religious activity (see F18News 12 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1569).

The Police are preparing to open a case against the couple and Muminov under Administrative Code Article 184-2 (illegal production, storage, import and distribution of religious materials) and Article 240, Part 2 (illegal missionary activity).

The Police told Umurzakov that the confiscated books will be sent to the Religious Affairs Committee for "expert analysis", after which the case will be opened against the three.

Are Bible and Injil banned?

Police Inspector Ataugliyev vigorously defended the raid which he had led. "We knew he [Umurzakov] stored banned religious literature in his home," he told Forum 18 from Fergana on 24 August. The Inspector refused to tell Forum 18 how the police knew this.

Asked what literature found in Umurzakov's home the police considered banned, Inspector Ataugliyev said, "the Bible, Injil [Uzbek New Testament], and other books". Asked whether the Bible and New Testament are banned in Uzbekistan, he refused to say. "The case is under investigation at the moment." He refused to talk further, and when asked whether he and his colleagues physically abused Umurzakov, he put the phone down.

Gulistan worship service raid ..

Nine church members in Gulistan in Syrdarya Region were punished in the wake of Gulistan City Police's raid on a local Baptist Church's Sunday morning worship service on 19 June, Baptists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 18 August. Two uniformed Police officers and four plain-clothed officials – the Baptists believe they were NSS secret Police officers - broke into the church at 9.30 am while the Baptists were worshipping. The officers had video cameras and filmed the approximately 21 people present, the Baptists complained. The Police also confiscated Baptist magazines and brochures.

One of the officials who raided the Church identified himself as Shukhrat Nazarov from the Gulistan City Administration, but the Baptists believe he works for the NSS secret Police. One of the officers in police uniform identified himself as Dilshod Rasulov from the Criminal Investigation Department of Gulistan Police.

.. is followed by mass fines

Cases were opened against the nine Baptists under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 (unregistered religious activity) and Article 241 (illegal teaching of religious doctrines). On 28 July, in a decision seen by Forum 18, Judge Ulugbek Jumayev of Gulistan City Criminal Court found all nine guilty.

Bayram Muradov (a Ukrainian citizen) was fined 4,973,500 Soms (15,392 Norwegian Kroner, 1,980 Euros or 2,850 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), 100 times the minimum monthly wage; Denis Bocharov, 2,486,750 Soms, 50 times; Marat Utyaganov, Ivan Prokhin and Sarvar Jambazov, each fined 149,205 Soms, three times; as well as Dilafruz Muradova, Lyubov

Bobkova, Yelena Aminova, Zinaida Sadykova, each fined 49,735 Soms, one minimum monthly wage.

In his verdict, Judge Jumayev also ordered that 12 copies of the Baptist magazine "Tropinka" (The Path) confiscated during the raid be destroyed. By contrast, he ordered to return to Muradov five other brochures which had also been confiscated as "evidence".

Gulistan City Court told Forum 18 that Jumayev as of 1 August was appointed Chair of Gulistan District Criminal Court. Reached on 24 August at the District Court, Judge Jumayev took down Forum 18's name, and asked to call back in 15 minutes. Jumayev's phone went unanswered later the same day and on 25 August.

Five months earlier, on 16 March, Judge Jumayev had fined under the same charges Muradov and two other members of the same church, Natalya Utyaganova and Nadezhda Davydova, and ordered the confiscated literature to be destroyed (see F18News 22 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1554).

Tashkent police raid, confiscation and pressure ..

On the evening of 16 April, Police of Tashkent's Hamza District, under the pretext of checking up on passports, raided the home of local Protestant Albina Bankova, according to the subsequent court verdict seen by Forum 18. Officers confiscated 3,529 religious books and brochures with 364 titles, as well as 155 audio cassette-tapes and CD discs. By contrast, a Tashkent-based source who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 August that the Police confiscated from Bankova 298 Christian books, 125 CD and DVD discs, 10 videotapes, and 40 audio-cassette tapes.

The source added that Bankova was immediately taken to Hamza District Police Station. She was held there for 18 hours and pressured to write a statement or sign the police records of the raid, which she refused to do. "The police made no records that she was brought to the station, and was released later."

.. fine, religious literature ordered destroyed

A case was then brought against Bankova under Administrative Code Article 184-2 and Article 240, Part 1. On 14 July, Judge Anvar Khusanov of Hamza District Criminal Court, in a verdict seen by Forum 18, found Bankova guilty. He fined her 2,486,750 Soms (7,692 Norwegian Kroner, 990 Euros or 1,425 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), fifty times the minimum monthly wage. The local source told Forum 18 that Bankova received the written copy of the court decision only on 16 August.

In his verdict, Judge Khusanov also ordered that all the Christian literature confiscated from her home be destroyed. This included five Bibles, 17 Russian and six Uzbek New Testaments, as well as two Children's Bibles.

Luisa Husnullina, Assistant to Judge Khusanov, told Forum 18 on 24 August that the Judge did not want to discuss the case. Asked why Khusanov ordered the Bibles and New Testaments to be destroyed, Husnullina at first denied it saying: "That cannot be true!" When Forum 18 pointed out that it was in the written verdict, she responded: "I cannot evaluate the Judge's decision."

Did court violate Administrative Code?

The Tashkent source complained to Forum 18 that the Court made several violations, including the fact that the Court made the decision in Bankova's absence, as also seen in the court decision, and that she only received the court decision more than a month after it was issued. Another violation is that based on Administrative Code Article 36, Part 1, an administrative case must be heard by a Court no later than two months after an administrative violation was recorded. "It's nonsense, because three months had already passed after the record of a violation," the source told Forum 18.

Explaining why the hearing took place three months after the administrative case was opened, Husnullina told Forum 18: "The judge asked for permission to extend the deadlines for investigation." However, she refused to say who authorised the extension and on what basis the extension was made. "In special cases the judges may do so," was all she would say. Husnullina refused to talk further to Forum 18.

Fined for "illegal" teaching of religion

A member of an officially registered Baptist Church has been fined in central Samarkand Region under Administrative Code Article 241 (violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines). On 11 August, Judge Aziz Safarov of Nurabad District Criminal Court fined Shoira Allayarova, member of Nurabad Baptist Church, 57,200 Soms (177 Norwegian Kroner, 23 Euros or 33 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), one month's minimum wage (the presidentially-decreed official minimum monthly wage rose to 57,200 Soms on 1 August).

The court decision – seen by Forum 18 - says that Allayarova "illegally" taught religion to Zamira Yarkulova, a resident of the village of Jom in Nurabad District. However, local Baptists, who asked not to be named, told Forum 18 that they believe that the authorities specifically targeted Allayarova, who has hearing deficiency, and was born to parents who cannot hear or talk. "The

authorities punished her because she was also giving material help to Zamina," they told Forum 18 on 17 August.

Reached on 25 August, Judge Safarov took down Forum 18's name. But when asked why he fined Allayarova, and whether it is illegal in Uzbekistan for individuals to share their beliefs with others, he put the phone down. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY