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UZBEKISTAN: New fines, Bible destructions follow UN concern over religious censorship

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

In late September a Judge in Karshi fined ten members of a Baptist church up to 50 times the minimum monthly wage each for meeting for worship without state permission. In a regular practice for Uzbekistan, the Judge ordered that confiscated personal Bibles and song books be destroyed. Officers asked the community in August why it was still meeting after being warned in an April raid that it was "illegal". Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service of more than 75 fines of up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage between January and September 2015 after raids and literature seizures. Seven were twice stopped after making a 1,000-kilometre (620 mile) round trip from Karshi to the one registered Jehovah's Witness community in Chirchik. The United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern in July over religious censorship, as well as torture, prison sentences, detentions and fines to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. It called on Uzbekistan to change its laws and practices.

Ten members of a religious community in Karshi [Qarshi], which meets for worship without seeking the state registration Uzbekistan demands, were fined in late September, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The Judge ordered that their confiscated personal Bibles and song books be destroyed. The punishments followed a Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raid on the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in April and a follow-up visit in August by two officials who asked why they were still meeting for worship despite being warned not to. Officials questioned church members' children separately in the absence of their parents or legal representatives.

Police and NSS secret police raided Jehovah's Witnesses' homes and worship meetings across Uzbekistan 81 times in 2014, they complained to Forum 18. Between January and September 2015, they noted continuing raids and literature seizures, with more than 75 fines of up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage (see below).

Twenty times the minimum monthly wage, since 1 September, is 2,604,800 Soms (8,250 Norwegian Kroner, 900 Euros or 950 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

In late September, a Baptist in the capital Tashkent was stopped by Police in the metro, who found religious books in his bag. In early October officers of the anti-Terrorism police used physical force when questioning him. A court fined him for carrying his Christian books in his bag (see below).

Police and NSS secret police regularly raid meetings for worship, including those of Baptists and other Protestants, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. Courts often hand down fines for "illegally" possessing religious literature and violation of the Religion Law. They also often order that confiscated religious literature be destroyed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

On 8 November armed police – some of them masked - raided the worship meeting of local Protestants in Tashkent. Without showing a warrant, officers seized religious books, discs, a guitar, computers and phones. Church members – including children - were taken to the police station where some were tortured (see F18News 26 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2125).

The Justice Ministry, together with the State Religious Affairs Committee, on 4 November gathered leaders of officially registered non-Muslim religious communities in Tashkent to instruct them to provide the state with detailed information on their religious activities, as well as any foreigners who attend their activities (see F18News 7 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2129).

United Nations calls for legal changes to end violations

On 21 July, after considering Uzbekistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed concern that "the legal provisions prohibiting proselytism and other missionary activities

continue to be in force".

The Committee also expressed concern about "unlawful arrests, detentions, torture and ill-treatment and convictions on religious extremism related charges of independent Muslims practising their faith outside registered structures", "arrest for 'illegal religious activity', detention, fines and prison sentences" for others who practice their faith "outside registered structures", and "censorship of religious materials and restrictions on their use only inside buildings of registered religious groups".

"The State party should guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief," the UN Human Rights Committee insisted in its report (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4). It said laws and practice must be changed to comply with the country's human rights commitments, including "through the decriminalization of proselytism and other missionary activities". It also called for investigation of "all acts of interference with the freedom of religion" of people "practising their religion outside registered structures".

81 raids in 2014, more than 75 fines in 2015

Among the religious communities which officials regularly raid, confiscate religious literature from and fine are Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2014 Police and NSS secret police raided their homes and worship meetings across Uzbekistan 81 times, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Raids continued in 2015, resulting in more than 75 fines on individuals between January and September 2015, with 55 of these fines to punish possessing religious literature. "Fines in 2015 varied from smaller amounts up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage," Jehovah's Witnesses lamented.

Officials have allowed only one Jehovah's Witness community in the whole country – in the town of Chirchik in Tashkent Region – to have the state registration which officials insist is required before people can exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. Officials stripped registration from the Jehovah's Witness community in Fergana in 2006. Other Jehovah's Witness communities have been repeatedly denied state registration (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837).

Two raids within two months, huge fines, literature destruction

On 25 September Judge Kosym Kholov, Chair of Karshi Criminal Court in Kashkadarya Region, fined ten members of a Baptist Church. They were punished under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 (violation of the Religion Law) and Article 184-2 (illegal storage of religious literature).

Fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage each, 6,512,000 Soms, were Viktor Tashpulatov, Mikhail Balykbayev, Nabizhon Bolikulov. Seven others - Utkir Karimov, Anvar Karimov, Ruzimurod Khonov, Ibrahim Khamidov, Kosim Ochilov, Khamid Rakhmanov and Mamakhol Khalbekova - were each fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,907,200 Soms.

Judge Kholov also with the same decision ordered the destruction of personal Bibles, Easter greeting cards addressed to members of the church as well as the Church's song books confiscated from the Baptists.

The ten fined Baptists received copies of the Court decision by mail on 9 October, church member Svetlana Andreychenko told Forum 18 on 12 November. She said they appealed against the decision on 23 October to the Regional Court "but have not yet received a response". She explained that the Regional Court has one month to respond to the complaint by Law.

Asked about the case, Ilhom Samiyev, Deputy Chair of the Karshi Court, insisted to Forum 18 on 13 November that the "Baptists violated the Law". However, he declined to discuss the case. Judge Kholov "is on vacation but you can talk to his Assistant, Bigmat Rakhmatov after lunch," he said.

Church "poisons the minds of children and deprives them of bright future"

Punishments followed raids on the Baptists' Sunday worship services in Karshi in April and August, Baptists told Forum 18.

The first raid took place on 26 April, when some thirty officials from the NSS secret police, regular Police, the local Police officer, Chair of the local mahalla Committee (residential administration) disrupted the Baptists' worship meeting.

The officials "took down the names of the worshippers, questioned them including some children also asking them in which public schools they studied." The officials "filmed the worship meeting" and "compelled some neighbours" who live near the worship place to "speak to the camera against the community, saying what they were dictated by the raiding officials."

The officers also filmed Gafur Imamov, who presented himself as representing Karshi City Education Department, declaring that the Church "poisons the minds of the children and deprives them of their bright future", Baptists complained to Forum 18. After seizing religious materials from the worshippers, the officers left.

Arif Nizamov, Head of Karshi Education Department, insisted that his Department "had nothing to do with" the raid. "We do not have anybody named Imamov working for the Department," he claimed to Forum 18 on 13 November. "We are not competent to check up on religious organisations." He referred Forum 18 to Karshi Hokimat's [Administration] religious affairs officials.

Muhiddin Shadmanov, Assistant to Bakhtiyor Kodirov, Deputy of the Hokim [Head of Administration] of Karshi with responsibility for religious issues, declined to comment on the raid on 13 November. Kodirov is "busy and cannot talk to Forum 18," he claimed.

Why still meeting for worship?

Some three months later, on 2 August, again during the Sunday worship service, two plain-clothed officials, who also led the April raid, came to inspect the Baptists. One of them gave his name as Jamshid (last name not given). The officials asked the Baptists why they were still gathering for worship after they were warned on 26 April. They took down the names of new people attending the meeting, and left saying that they will soon refer the case to Court.

Karshi City Police told Forum 18 on 13 November the officer who raided the 2 August Baptist meeting was Jamal Sharipov.

Sharipov claimed to Forum 18 on 13 November that the activities of the Baptists are "banned" in Uzbekistan. Asked what he means and what State authority banned the Baptists' activity, he did not say. "I cannot explain this to you, please, call me back in 30 minutes." Called back later, Sharipov's phone was switched off.

Threatened for attending state-registered meetings for worship

Authorities also punish Jehovah's Witnesses who try to abide by the very restrictive regulations imposed on their religious freedom. Police in Karshi on 7 March and 19 March stopped seven Jehovah's Witnesses as they returned from worship meetings held in Chirchik. The seven had to travel more than 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) round-trip to Chirchik as it is the only place where they can officially meet for worship.

Police then searched their homes without a warrant and confiscated Bibles and personal belongings, such as mobile devices and personal notes. Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. One of the seven, who was detained and questioned on 19 March, was again questioned one month later in April. "Police threatened to charge her criminally for illegal religious activity."

Stopped at metro station, fined for religious books

On 21 September, Police at Tashkent Metro Station in Mirabad District stopped a Baptist, Timur Akhmedov. "When the Police officers realised that he had a Bible, Christian booklets and discs, they confiscated the literature and questioned Akhmedov about where he received the books," his fellow church members told Forum 18. "They then released him, saying they would send the literature for 'expert' analysis."

Fifteen days later, on 6 October, Akhmedov was summoned by the same Metro Police where he was detained and taken to Mirabad Police Station. "Mirabad Police bullied Akhmedov, pushing and pulling him, hitting him a couple of times. Officers questioned him about where he received the literature." The Baptists lamented that the Police did this "despite the fact the religious 'expert' analysis said that, except for three booklets, the state allowed the Bible and the rest of the literature were allowed to be used inside Churches." The Mirabad Police prepared an administrative case the same day and took Akhmedov to the Court.

On 6 October Judge Matyanboy Matchanov of Tashkent's Mirabad District Criminal Court fined Akhmedov five times the minimum monthly wage, 651,200 Soms, under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for illegal storage of religious literature, his fellow Baptists complained to Forum 18. The Judge also with the same decision ordered the destruction of his personal Bible and other confiscated literature.

Asked why Judge Matchanov fined Akhmedov for carrying his Christian books, which are officially permitted by the State, Jasur Baltabayev, his Assistant took down Forum 18's name and question, and asked Forum 18 to call back in five minutes. Subsequent calls to Judge Matchanov went unanswered. Once Baltabayev answered the phone, but as soon as he heard Forum 18's name put the phone down.

"Our duty to examine bags"

Major Ramiz Badriddinov of Tashkent City Metro Police on 12 November told Forum 18 Akhmedov's bag had been searched "because it is our duty to examine passengers' bags for security reasons, and we found the religious literature." He added that "if we find religious literature we must send it to the State Religious Affairs Committee, which we did." The Metro Police then referred the case to the Mirabad District Police's anti-Terrorism Unit to "prepare the case for administrative punishment." He explained that the Metro Police is "not competent" to prepare cases for Court.

Asked why Akhmedov was prosecuted for having religious books which even the state's "expert" analysis said were allowed to be

used in Churches, Badriddinov did not answer. He did not wish to talk to Forum 18 further and referred it to Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police.

Asked why Akhmedov had been bullied and questioned simply for carrying religious books in his bag, Mukabyr Jalalov, Chief of Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police adamantly insisted to Forum 18 on 12 November that his Unit had not handled the case. "If the Metro Police stopped him, then they must have questioned him and prepared the case for Court." Told that the Metro Police told Forum 18 that Mirabad anti-Terrorism Police questioned Akhmedov and referred the case to Court, and asked why Akhmedov was harassed by his officers and taken to the Court, Jalalov repeated his previous claim.

Large fine he knew nothing about

Elsewhere in Navoi [Navoiy] Region, in early July Navoi City Court Bailiffs summoned local Baptist Nikolai Serin, instructing him to pay a fine given to him ten months earlier which he knew nothing about. On 5 September 2014, Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi City Criminal Court had heard the case in his absence, and found Serin guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Judge fined him 50 times the minimum monthly wage (as of August 2014), 4,805,250 Soms.

Judge Mansurov with the same decision ordered the destruction of DVDs and CDs, and confiscation of Serin's computer for the benefit of the State, handing over the Christian books to the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent.

"I did not know about the fine since I was in hospital seriously injured from a car accident," Serin told Forum 18 on 12 November 2015. He complained that the Court did not provide him with a copy of the decision, and that he received it from the Bailiffs in July for the first time.

The fine followed a Police raid on Serin's home in Navoi on 17 August 2014. A Sunday worship service at another Navoi home was raided the same day (see F18News 1 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1991).

Norbek Mirzayev, Assistant to Judge Mansurov, refused to comment on the case on 12 November or put Forum 18 through to the Judge. Asked why Serin was given such a huge fine for keeping his Bible and other Christian books in his home, why the case was heard in his absence and why he was provided with a copy of the decision only a year later, Mirzayev replied: "I am not competent to answer your questions."

Asked to put Forum 18 through to the Judge or anyone in the Court who could answer the questions, Mirzayev brushed off Forum 18. "Neither the Judge nor anyone else will talk to you. We don't know who you are."

Judge Mansurov regularly fines individuals for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. He even writes articles attacking their right to freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 8 December 2014).

Religious literature "enough evidence to prove my guilt"

Serin appealed in July 2015 to Navoi Regional Criminal Court complaining that the fine was "unlawful" since he did "not violate the law" by storing the Christian literature in his home. He also complained that Navoi City Court "violated the procedures" by hearing the case in his absence as well as by providing the copy of the decision to him only ten months later.

However on 16 October, again in his absence, Judge Nozira Kodyrova of the Regional Court upheld the City Court decision. Kodyrova "ignored our arguments about the procedural violations in her decisions, saying that the fact I was absent is not important", Serin complained to Forum 18. She argued that the "religious literature confiscated from my home is enough evidence to prove my guilt."

Serin told Forum 18 he will file a cassation appeal against Kadyrova's decision. "I understand if Kadyrova cancelled the fine or returned the case for further investigation by the first instance Court then the confiscated materials should have been returned to me." However, "they cannot do that since who knows where, for instance, my notebook computer is. I am sure some official owns it now, and has been using it," he lamented.

Boby Akhadov, Head of the Chancellery of Navoi Regional Court, refused to comment on the case on 13 November. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Kodyrova or the Chair of the Court, claiming that they were busy. "All you can do is visit the Court on Thursdays if you have any questions."

Fines of up to 20 times minimum wage

Among the fines given in 2015 to Jehovah's Witnesses, the largest known to Forum 18 was a 10 February fine in Navoi Region of 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The fine followed a 17 January Police and NSS secret police raid on the woman's home. Officers confiscated her Bible and computer.

Police detained a Jehovah's Witness in Angren in Tashkent Region on 9 June and took her to the Prosecutor's Office. "There she was interrogated and forced to write a statement saying that she is a Jehovah's Witness and has religious literature at her home." She was fined in her absence and not given a copy of the court decision.

On 20 July in Tashkent, Police and NSS secret police raided and searched the home of a Jehovah's Witness. "All her personal religious literature was seized, along with personal belongings such as her computer," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Police in Almalyk in Tashkent Region in July raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness, seizing her personal religious literature. On 23 July Almalyk District Criminal Court fined her 8 times the minimum monthly wage.

Police in Denov in the south-eastern Surkhandarya Region on 4 July raided and searched the homes of two Jehovah's Witnesses. "Police interrogated the women, forced them to write statements that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, and seized religious materials."

Samarkand raids

Samarkand Police on 19 February "entered the home of a female Witness under the pretext of speaking to her husband", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers then confiscated her religious literature. "Police forced the Witness to write explanatory notes on the source of her personal religious literature, brought her to the police station, and confiscated her mobile phone." Her husband, who is not a Jehovah's Witness, "was told to write an explanatory note stating that he burned his wife's religious literature." In a hearing on 20 March in her absence, Samarkand Criminal Court gave her an administrative fine.

Samarkand Police also on 16 April raided a worship meeting of six Jehovah's Witnesses in a home. Officers confiscated personal religious literature, mobile phones and other belongings. (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=1862.

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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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