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UZBEKISTAN: "Isolate the population"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. In at least three cases known to Forum 18 News Service, and in line with frequent court practice, a court has ordered that Bibles and New Testaments be destroyed. These violations of freedom of religion or belief continue, an entire district of the capital Tashkent being searched in early March. During the search at least one Arabic-language Koran was confiscated and its owner detained. Local police told Forum 18 that "we have religious freedoms". And on 12 March a Christian in Fergana was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious literature. Summarising the reason for such censorship and raids, a state news agency published an article stating that the government aimed to "isolate the population, especially young people, from the influence of various harmful movements".

Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. In at least three cases known to Forum 18 News Service, and in line with frequent court practice, a court has ordered that Bibles and New Testaments be destroyed. And on 12 March a Christian in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious literature.

"The police regularly raid homes of Christians and confiscate all their literature," Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 14 March. "The authorities are trying to deprive Christians of any spiritual literature."

Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in private homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

In July 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the frequent raids, as well as - among other things - religious censorship, torture and fines to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. It called on Uzbekistan to "guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief" (see F18News 18 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2122).

The authorities also search for religious materials on mobile phones, tablets and other electronic devices (see F18News 21 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2160).

Entire residential district raided for religious literature

At the beginning of March 2016, every home in Orikzor mahalla (local district), in the Uchteppa District of the capital Tashkent, was raided by 20 National Security Service (NSS) secret police and ordinary police officers to hunt for religious literature.

In at least one case, an Arabic-language Koran was confiscated as it did not have a stamp from the state's Religious Affairs Committee, residents who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 10 March. The eldest man from the family the Koran was confiscated from was detained all day at Uchteppa Police Station. "Officials could find no other literature in their home, and therefore released the man the next day," other residents told Forum 18. "But they confiscated the Koran."

Orikzor mahalla local police officer Shukhrat (who would not give his last name) claimed to Forum 18 on 10 March "we have religious freedoms", but would not say why the Koran was confiscated and the man detained all day. "We are not allowed to talk to you over the phone."

Uchteppa District Police on 10 March referred Forum 18 to Jahongir Gaziyeu from Uchteppa Anti-Terrorism Police. He said that he "cannot discuss the case with you over the phone". The so-called Anti-Terrorism Police often acts against people exercising their freedom of religion or belief (see eg. F18News 26 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2125).

Searched, jailed

On 12 March plain clothes and ordinary police without search warrants illegally searched the homes of Latipzhon Mamazhanov and other Christians in Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan, local Christians who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 16 March. Police searched the homes for religious literature and arrested Mamazhanov. On 12 March he was sentenced by Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana Criminal Court to the maximum 15 days in jail under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 183 ("Hooliganism").

Short term jailings are irregularly used against a variety of people to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief, especially if there has been a previous offence (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). Mamazhanov was arrested and fined ion 2011 under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons") (see F18News 5 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1643).

Asked about why Mamazhanov and others' houses were illegally searched and he himself jailed, Lieutenant Colonel Otabek Azimov, Deputy Head of Fergana Regional Police Criminal Investigation Division, claimed to Forum 18 on 18 March that he did not know of the case and "am not competent to answer your questions". A similar raid in Fergana, followed by fines, took place on 22 November 2015 (see below).

"Passport control" raid, confiscations, detentions and torture

Very shortly after Nikolai Serin and three other ethnic Uzbek Council of Churches Baptists from Navoi [Navoiy] Region in central Uzbekistan arrived on 5 February at the home of friends in Denau in the southern Surkhandarya Region, the local police officer and mahalla committee chair arrived. Claiming passport control as a reason, officers took the Baptists to Denau Police Station, Serin told Forum 18 on 16 March.

At the Police Station someone who claimed to be Sherzod Abdullayev, Head of the local Anti-Terrorism Police, questioned them and confiscated Christian books and a camera. The books were allegedly to be sent for "expert analysis".

"Expert analysis" is a frequent pretext for the confiscation and destruction of texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Police told one of the ethnic Uzbek Baptists that he had "betrayed his traditions by becoming a Christian". The Baptists were then taken to separate rooms and continuously questioned while standing up for more than eight hours, from 6 pm on 5 February until 2.20 am on 6 February. They were then allowed to sleep on chairs.

Torture, often far more severe than this, is normal in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Relatives and friends of the Baptists travelled over 600 kilometres [370 miles] to Denau Police Station to demand the Baptists' release. The internal passports of the friends and relatives were confiscated and they were also detained at the Police Station. However, all the Baptists were eventually released at 6 pm on 6 February. Baptists suspect that without the protests of the relatives and friends the originally detained Baptist group could have been given short-term jail sentences.

Dilmurod Kurbanov – the real Head of Denau Anti-Terrorism Police – put the phone down when asked by Forum 18 about the case on 16 March. Calls to him and his Deputy Jumanazar Mamatraimov were not answered on 16 or 17 March.

Raided, searched, detained, literature confiscated

On 12 December 2015 relatives of Solomon Tuayev, a Council of Churches Baptist, gave a Christian book on a Tashkent street to a man who turned out to be a plain-clothes police officer. Tuayev was temporarily staying with another Council of Churches Baptist, Gleb Izmestyev.

At 11 pm on 14 December, around 20 plain clothes police raided Izmestyev's flat in Yakkasaray District as he entered it, he told Forum 18 on 14 March. Police confiscated his mobile phone, and searched him and his flat for three hours. Officers confiscated about 750 Uzbek and Russian-language books, booklets, CDs and DVDs. They also confiscated his car and two Christian songbooks and a New Testament commentary in it, before taking Izmestyev and Tuayev to Yakkasaray District Police Station.

At the police station police the two Baptists were fingerprinted and told the confiscated literature would be sent for "expert analysis". The two were then questioned for two and a half hours, especially about where the Uzbek language texts came from. They were then charged under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

After this the two Baptists were taken to Izmestyev's parents' home in Yakkasaray District, which police illegally searched without a

warrant. But finding no religious literature in the home the police left.

Azamat Nabirayev, Head of Yakkasaray Anti-Terrorism Police, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 14 March. "I do not have time for you," he claimed. "Please send all questions to the Foreign Ministry." He then put the phone down.

Fined

On 22 December Judge Khusniddin Atavaliyev of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court fined Izmestyev and Tuayev three times the minimum monthly wage or 390,720 Soms (about 1,150 Norwegian Kroner, 120 Euros, or 136 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) under Administrative Code Article 184-2. Judge Atavaliyev also ordered the destruction of all the Uzbek and Russian-language confiscated materials, without any exceptions.

However, Judge Atavaliyev on 14 March 2016 claimed to Forum 18 that "I did not order the destruction of all literature but only part of it. I ordered the rest to be handed over to local officials." He then claimed that "I can only explain my decision to the defendants and their lawyer. If they do not agree with our decision they can appeal." Izmestyev pointed out that "it is clearly written in the Judge's decision that the confiscated materials must be destroyed without any exception".

Izmestyev also stated that "one week after we received the decision in January, court officials told us that unless we pay the fine immediately the car will not be returned. So we had to pay the fine."

Raid and confiscation

On 22 November 2015 police illegally raided without a search warrant the private home of Council of Churches Baptist Raisa Kuznetsova, in Fergana. Only two of the police identified themselves, Lieutenant Akhror Akhmedov and local police officer Oybek Mahmudov.

Police confiscated 15,453 items of Christian literature, including about 900 Christian books, 10 Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments and thousands of booklets, magazines and other materials, Kuznetsova told Forum 18 on 14 March 2016. Illegally, the police did not provide a written record of the confiscations.

Lieutenant Akhmedov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 14 March.

On 23 November 2015 police took Kuznetsova and her son Boris to Fergana Police Station to question them for about three hours. Police then charged them under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and Article 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

On 24 November police took Kuznetsova to the Police Station again, allegedly to receive the confiscated literature back. Instead she was questioned for seven hours about how she had received the literature.

On 22 December Judge Nilufar Muminova of Fergana City Criminal Court fined both Baptists five times the minimum monthly salary or 651,200 Soms (about 1,900 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 230 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 and Article 240, Part 2. Judge Muminova also ordered that the confiscated books and materials be given to the Religious Affairs Committee's Fergana representative.

Asked by Forum 18 on 14 March about the confiscations, Judge Muminova claimed: "I cannot say anything on that, and I cannot do anything about my decision. Only a higher court can cancel my decision." She then added: "Let the Baptists appeal against it."

Kuznetsova told Forum 18 that they did not appeal against the verdict. "We know from our experience that it is highly unlikely that a higher court will cancel it." She also noted that only 10 days was given for an appeal to be lodged.

"Isolate the population"

Others have suffered similar raids, confiscations, fines and literature destructions, those targeted told Forum 18.

The government makes no secret of such human rights violations. Between late November 2015 and mid-January 2016, at least 18 individuals were fined for carrying with them or keeping "illegal" religious materials in their homes and further investigations continue, Forum 18 notes.

On 11 January the state-controlled UzA news agency praised what it described as the vigilance of customs officers and claimed they had stopped the import of 50,000 illegal religious texts in 2015. The state-controlled 12news agency noted similar claims, adding that "any religious propaganda outside the walls of officially registered religious buildings is banned".

Summarising the reason for such censorship and raids, UzA author Bekzod Bozorov stated that the government aimed to "isolate the population, especially young people, from the influence of various harmful movements".

"We only implement the law"

In December 2015, eight cases were opened against people for importing "illegal religious literature", Customs Investigator Shavkat Salihov of Tashkent Railway Customs Office told Forum 18 on 14 March 2016. He would not give much detail, but said that six cases related to material on electronic devices, and two to importing Islamic books without prior authorisation by the Religious Affairs Committee. He added that all those charged were fined. He admitted that one Koran was confiscated as the passenger had not declared it in their customs declaration.

Asked whether he thinks the censorship is a violation of the passengers' freedom of religion or belief, Salihov responded: "Customs organs only implement the law, which makes the Religious Affairs Committee responsible for the import of any religious materials into the country. They must give their prior consent to any import in advance."

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss either the censorship or any raids, fines, confiscations or destructions with Forum 18 on 16 March. Committee Chair Artykbek Yusupov's phone was repeatedly put down when Forum 18 introduced itself. Press Secretary Shovkat Hamdamov and "Expert analysis" Section Head Sobotjon Nasimov both claimed Forum 18 had phoned a wrong number. (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.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY