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UZBEKISTAN: Deportation, fines, Bible and Koran seizures

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

A Russian was deported with no court decision and home-owner fined after police raided a Tashkent Christian meeting. Officials told a Muslim seeking back her seized Koran manuscript that police cannot be prosecuted. Tashkent Airport customs seized pilgrims' Korans. A court ordered New Testament texts destroyed.

In early April, a Russian Protestant was deported back to Russia with no court decision to punish her for attending a Christian meeting in a flat in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. Police raided the meeting, seizing Christian books and other items, possibly with information from an informer. The home-owner was fined.

Police officers and customs officials frequently seize individuals' religious literature, claiming it is "illegal".

A Muslim woman in Kokand is still campaigning to get back a valuable centuries-old Koran manuscript seized from her in 2006 which Court Bailiffs claim was "lost" after being stored in a safe. Officials told her the Police Investigator who originally confiscated the "lost" manuscript cannot now be brought to trial (see below).

In Navoi in April, police raided a Christian family, seizing religious literature and other items. One officer told the home owner she may be fined (see below).

In Urgench, police search the bags of a local Christian at the market, seizing a copy of a booklet with three New Testament letters. In late March a judge fined her and ordered the New Testament booklet destroyed (see below).

In Nukus in March, a Judge fined a local Protestant for having Christian materials in his home when police raided it. He ordered the book and discs confiscated (see below).

At Tashkent Airport in January, customs officers seized Korans and other Muslim literature from pilgrims returning from Mecca (see below).

On the land border with Turkmenistan in May, customs officers stopped two visitors from Turkmenistan from leaving Uzbekistan after they discovered Christian materials - including the Bible - in their mobile phones. The two women were fined and then had difficulty leaving the country as their Uzbek visas had by then expired (see below).

Tashkent: Raid

On 24 March seven officials, including three uniformed police officers, broke into the home of Yelena Potorochina, a Protestant in Tashkent's Yakkasaray District, Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 18 April. At the flat five Protestant women were meeting to discuss the Christian faith, led by a Russian citizen Tatyana Bezhenova. Potorochina's son was also in the flat during the raid.

The officials included the Head of Yakkasaray District Anti-Terrorism Police Azamat Nabirayev, and Yakkasary District Police Major Ramiz Fozilov with Police Inspectors Toirzhon Pakhruddinov and Zhamoliddin Karshibayev. They searched Potorochina's home and confiscated four Christian books including two New Testaments, 12 notebooks with personal notes written by the participants, a laptop computer, a desktop computer's hard disc, and a digital camera.

Raids on private homes to search for religious literature of all beliefs (including Muslim, Christian, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna texts) are common in Uzbekistan. Any printed or electronic literature found is confiscated and those who possess the texts punished (see eg. F18News 30 March 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2268>).

The officials also confiscated Bezhenova's Russian passport. On 30 March Bezhenova left written complaints at the Presidential Administration and Yakkasaray District Prosecutor's Office. When she also visited the Russian Embassy officials refused to help her and advised her to hire a lawyer.

Yakkasaray District Police Inspector Karshibayev did not want to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 11 May, and referred the inquiry to District Anti-Terrorism Police Head Nabirayev. Asked why police raided Potorochina's home and confiscated private property, he claimed to Forum 18 that "everything was returned to her".

Told that the Court ordered the computer to be destroyed, Inspector Karshibayev replied: "I am not going to discuss the case with you. You can send questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Fine, Russian deported

On 3 April Judge Timur Kasymov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court on 3 April found Potorochina guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 ("Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the unauthorised organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship"). He fined her 7,488,750 Soms, or 50 times the minimum monthly wage. He also ordered the destruction of Potorochina's laptop computer.

However, on 17 April Tashkent City Appeal Court reduced Potorochina's fine to 748,875 Soms or five times the minimum monthly wage.

On 4 April the authorities deported Bezhenova back to Russia, but without a legally-required court order. She also received her passport back that day.

Asked on 12 May why he fined her and ordered her computer to be destroyed, when her "offence" was to exercise her freedom of religion and belief stated in the Constitution, Judge Kasymov told Forum 18: "I cannot discuss my decisions with third parties". He did not answer when Forum 18 asked why Bezhenova was deported without the legally-required court order.

Tashkent: Informer?

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that they suspect that a woman who attends their meetings for worship may be an informer for the authorities. They note that she was the last to enter the flat, left the door unlocked "against security measures", and hung a towel from the window of the flat before the raid. "We think that the towel may have been a sign to the authorities that we were having a teaching session," Protestants stated.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police carries out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during meetings for worship, and the recruitment of spies within communities - including among leaders (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Kokand: Centuries-old Koran confiscated by police - sold abroad?

In 2006 police in Kokand [Qo'qon] in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Region raided the home of a Muslim woman, Rahbarkhon Adylova. Officers confiscated a centuries-old Koran manuscript that is thought to be worth an extremely large sum of money. It has been in her family for many generations, and in Soviet times she was approached several times to sell the Koran for an extremely high price. She refused all these approaches.

On 23 June 2006 Judge P. Mamatusmonov of Kokand Criminal Court ordered the Koran manuscript to be returned to Adylova. (Forum 18 has seen the Judge's decision.) Yet when Adylova went to reclaim her Koran, Court Bailiffs told her that it had allegedly been "lost" from the safe where it had been stored.

Adylova told Forum 18 on 16 May 2017 that when she realised the Koran was "stolen from the safe after the Court decision in 2006", she complained for several years to various authorities with no success. In early 2017 she complained to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev via his website and started a one-person picket in front of the Presidential Administration's building in Tashkent.

Adylova said that an official from the office of Presidential Advisor Tursunkhan Khudaybergenov then called her, saying that he would meet her on 26 April. Khudaybergenov was in 2006 the Head of Fergana Regional Police when the Koran was confiscated. When Adylova complained to Khudaybergenov about this in 2006, she said that he publicly claimed that she was "trying to blackmail" his officials.

Adylova and her daughter were met on 26 April 2017 not by Khudaybergenov, but by officials of Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Administration. "I don't remember the name of the official, but he told us that they will see what they can do but did not promise anything," Adylova stated.

Presidential Administration officials who would not give their names refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Advisor Khudaybergenov on 12 May. One official claimed that "we cannot give you any information. You can send a letter to the Foreign Ministry".

Human rights defenders and others have told Adylova that the Koran "may have been sold abroad", and that "it is unlikely that she will be able to recover it", independent news agency centre1.com reported on 28 April.

Kokand: Impunity for police

After Adylova's 26 April meeting in Tashkent, Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the then in 2006 Police Investigator Alisher Khuzhamkulov. He had confiscated the Koran from Adylova.

However, the Prosecutor's Office did "not invite me to record my testimony or to attend the court hearing," Adylova told Forum 18. Fergana Regional Prosecutor Muzaffar Abdurakhmanov then informed her in writing that Investigator Khuzhamkulov had been amnestied, because the time period for criminal liability had expired.

Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office officials, who would not give their names, refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Regional Prosecutor Abdurakhmanov on 12 May.

"The authorities incriminate people many years after events for a stolen mobile phone, but for a valuable Koran they give themselves the excuse of the expiry of the term of criminal liability," Adylova complained. "The authorities have promised many times that they will help find the book and return it to us, but up until now nothing has been done."

There is within Uzbekistan a culture of impunity for officials carrying out unjust and oppressive actions (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Navoi: Raid and confiscations

On 6 April three police officers and two other officials in Navoi [Nawoiy] in the central Navoi Region raided the home of Alla Dobronravova, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church. Two of the police officers were Mirkomil Usmonov of Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Kamil Yakubov of Navoi City Police. Police also brought with them the Chair and one employee of the local mahalla committee (local residential administration) as witnesses of the search and confiscation.

Mahalla committees are a key part of the state's structures of repression (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

The five officials arrived at 6 pm and claimed they were carrying out a "passport check". Those within the flat during the raid were Dobronravova, Olga Tsirkunyak (her daughter), and Ivan Tsirkunyak (her daughter's husband). The police presented a search warrant from Navoi City Prosecutor written in Uzbek, which no-one present understood.

Police confiscated Christian materials, including five books, two songbooks, two DVD discs, and two personal notebooks with notes, Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 April. Police told the family that these items will be sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for "expert analysis".

Such allegedly "expert analysis" is often used to justify violations of freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Officers also told Dobronravova that she may be punished 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"). Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and any items used to manufacture or distribute them.

Asked about the case, Navoi Regional Police on 12 May told Forum 18 that CID Officer Usmonov was "not available" and referred it to Captain Abdumalik Sadikov from the CID, who also oversees cases repressing freedom of religion and belief. Sadikov admitted that officers had raided Dobronravova's home and confiscated books and other items, but refused to comment. He asked Forum 18 to talk to Officer Usmonov.

Usmonov on 12 May at first admitted who he was, but when Forum 18 asked about the case he claimed it was "a wrong number". He then put the phone down.

Urgench: Market arrest, confiscation, fine, destruction

On 18 February police in Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region, including Police Inspectors Nizomboy Khudoyorov and Ulugbek Ruzmetov, stopped Dilorom Khudoybergenova at the town's open-air market. The officials brought her to the Police Station within the market, and searched her bags full of groceries. As well as the groceries, the police found a book containing the three short New Testament texts the First, Second, and Third Letters of John with commentaries in Uzbek.

Khudoybergenova was then taken to Urgench City Police Station, where she was questioned by CID Major Shavkat Bekjanov. He wrote a report of the incident, and confiscated the book containing the First, Second and Third Letters of John, as well as Khudoybergenova's mobile phone.

When Khudoybergenova objected to this and told Major Bekjanov that she will write to the President, Bekjanov "began shouting at her and warned her that he will open a criminal case if she complains". Having been arrested at 5 pm, Khudoybergenova was kept at the Police Station until 9 pm before being released.

Major Bekjanov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 12 May. Asked why police stopped Khudoybergenova when she was shopping and confiscated the Christian book from her, and why he threatened her with a criminal case, he replied: "I do not understand your questions." He then put the phone down.

On 28 March Judge Alisher Kahharov of Urgench City Criminal Court fined Khudaybergenova 14,977,500 Soms, or 100 times the minimum monthly wage. She was convicted 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").

The Judge also ordered the destruction of the Biblical book of the three letters of John, and the confiscation of Khudoybergenova's mobile phone. Religious literature - including the Bible and Islamic texts - is often ordered to be confiscated and destroyed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Azamat Khaytboyev, Judge Kahharov's Assistant, claimed to Forum 18 the Judge is "in a seminar", and referred Forum 18 to Judge Alisher Avetov, "who can answer your questions". But numerous calls to Avetov's phone the same day went unanswered.

Nukus: Fine

On 27 November 2016 police raided the flat of Bakhytbergen Abdikarimov in Nukus in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region. Officers confiscated Christian materials and a DVD of his wedding. They then took him to a police station where he was questioned for several hours and then released.

While under arrest and repeatedly later, police tried to pressure him into "confessing" that he had broken 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") (see F18News 10 February 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2255>).

On 16 March 2017 Nukus City Criminal Court fined Abdikarimov 1,497,750 Soms, or 10 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Court also ordered the confiscation of a Christian book entitled "Social Concept of Evangelical Christian Churches of Uzbekistan", as well as three Christian DVDs.

Aman, who would not give his last name, the Head of Nukus Court's Chancellery, on 15 May refused to discuss the case. Forum 18's subsequent calls to the Chancellery on the same day went unanswered.

Nukus City Police also refused to discuss the case on 15 May.

Tashkent airport: Korans, other Islamic books confiscated from pilgrims

In January customs officials at Tashkent Airport confiscated Korans and other Muslim books from pilgrims returning from the umra pilgrimage to Mecca (known as the "lesser pilgrimage"), a Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals - who witnessed the confiscations - told Forum 18 on 10 May. The pilgrims had bought the Korans and other books in Mecca.

"I do not know if or what punishments the pilgrims received since I do not know them," the Muslim said. "I myself have when in Mecca not bought any religious literature, as I was afraid that I could get into trouble."

Customs officials routinely search travellers and confiscate any religious literature they find, including on mobile phones. The punishments given for the "crime" of having such texts can be severe, and torture can also be used against those who possess religious literature (see eg. F18News 19 December 2016 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2241>).

The state-controlled procedure for selecting umra pilgrims is the same as for the haj pilgrimage, on which severe restrictions are imposed. Local Muslims also state that officials demand bribes or "unofficial payments" which more than double the cost of pilgrimages (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Khorezm: Arrests, fines, confiscations at border with Turkmenistan

In May two visiting female Protestants from Turkmenistan were fined in the western Khorezm Region, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Uzbek customs officers searched the Protestants as they prepared to cross back into Turkmenistan, and discovered Christian materials in their mobile phones. The materials included sermons, songs, and the Bible in Uzbek. The two women's passports were confiscated, preventing them from leaving, as were their mobile phones.

Over the next few days officials summoned the women for questioning each day, often for several hours at a time. They were then fined about 14,000 Soms each under the Administrative Code.

The authorities prevented the two women from leaving Uzbekistan on the date they had expected, which was when their Uzbek visas expired. So the women had to extend their Uzbek visas, so that they would not be punished even more for being in the country without the required documentation. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief 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://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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