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UZBEKISTAN: No books allowed, Bible ordered destroyed

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan still searches homes and fines people for meeting and having religious literature, claiming in one case to look for a gun. After one person admitted to reading Christian books at home, their home was raided and Bible confiscated. Elsewhere, a Bible was destroyed.

On 10 November police in Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan raided the private flat of Irina Stepanova, a member of the local state-registered Baptist Church. Police claimed that they were looking for an allegedly illegally stored gun, but concentrated on confiscating Christian books. She now faces charges for possessing Christian books and other Christian material (see below).

On 19 November, 14 officials from various agencies, including the local police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, raided the private home of Stanislav Kim in Urgench in Khorezm Region in north-western Uzbekistan. People meeting for Sunday morning worship were arrested, interrogated for two hours and threatened at a police station. Christian books were confiscated. After one person admitted under interrogation to reading Christian books their home was also also raided and books including their personal Bible were confiscated (see below).

After police in August 2017 followed a Protestant Pastor from Urgench and others they had put under surveillance on a visit to Kungrad in the neighbouring Karakalpakstan Region, large fines were imposed on Protestants and one person was tortured. More fines have now been imposed for having religious books in a private home, and texts including the Bible have been ordered to be destroyed. Further fines may soon be imposed (see below).

In the region around the capital Tashkent, police in Yangiyul District raided the private homes of people in the local state-registered Baptist Church and confiscated literature as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed was visiting the country. There were multiple violations of legal procedure in the raids and searches, and Baptists thought that some of those raided would be fined for exercising freedom of religion and belief. Three people including a Pastor have now been fined (see below).

And on 4 November, six Muslim prisoners of conscience were freed after long jail terms. All had been jailed in connected trials for meeting to study the works of theologian Said Nursi and discuss their faith (see below).

Alleged "gun" search, Bibles and Christian texts confiscated

On 10 November police in Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan raided the private flat of Irina Stepanova, a member of the local state-registered Baptist Church. Against international human rights law, only religious communities with such state registration are allowed to exist (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>). Without showing a legally-required search warrant, a group of five officials who refused to identify themselves forced their way into the flat at 1 pm. One official was in police uniform, but the rest wore plain clothes.

The officials claimed that Stepanova "illegally stores a gun in her flat", Baptists who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 December. But the officials apparently ignored the alleged "gun" while searching the flat, and instead confiscated three Bibles, one Baptist songbook, Christian magazines, Christian booklets, 22 CD and DVD discs, and 6 personal notebooks with poems.

Andijan Police have opened a case 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") against Stepanova. The possible penalty is a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

The Andijan Police duty officer refused to give his name to Forum 18 on 7 December, and referred all questions to Kakhromon Irgashev, Head of the local police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department. But Irgashev did not answer his phone any

time Forum 18 rang.

Strict censorship, reading religious texts in private homes banned

Strict censorship is enforced against all religious literature, and officials often raid private homes to search for such texts. Texts including those which have passed the state's censorship are routinely confiscated. Officials have also ordered that religious believers cannot read religious texts - such as the Bible - in their own homes. Followers of a variety of beliefs are afraid to keep religious literature in their homes, and some have even felt they must with great sadness destroy their own religious texts, a cross-section of people have told Forum 18 (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Urgench raid on meeting for worship, book confiscations

On 19 November, 14 officials from various agencies, including the local police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, raided the private home of Stanislav Kim in Urgench [Urganch] in Khorezm Region in north-western Uzbekistan.

Kim is a member of the local unregistered Baptist Church, who was in August 2016 sentenced to two years' corrective labour in Urgench for having religious books at home. He has to live under restrictions with 20 per cent of his salary confiscated by the state (see F18News 29 September 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2219>). This punishment (his second since August 2015) followed an ordinary police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raid on his home in May 2016 (see F18News 28 June 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2192>).

During the latest November 2017 raid, officials immediately started filming 10 adults with children who were meeting for Sunday worship, Baptists who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 29 November. The officials then confiscated 34 Christian books, 18 booklets, and 4 magazines.

Nine of the 10 adults at the meeting, including Kim, were arrested and taken to Urgench Police Station. Baptists complained that those arrested were interrogated for two hours, forced to write statements, threatened, and physically harassed.

Torture or the threat of this is "routine" in Uzbekistan, the United Nations (UN) Committee against Torture found in 2007 (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Another raid immediately, personal Bible and other books confiscated

One of the arrested Baptists, Oybek Rahimov, admitted under questioning that he read Christian books in his own home. Six police officers led by Sh. Bekchanov of the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department then immediately raided Rahimov's home in Gullanbok in Yangiaryk District.

The officers searched Rahimov's home without the legally-required search warrant, and confiscated his Uzbek-language Bible, Injil (Uzbek New Testament), two Baptist songbooks, a children's Bible, CDs, and his laptop computer.

After a tip-off from a local police officer, police had previously in February 2016 raided Rahimov's home as Christians were meeting for worship. After Christian books were confiscated and ordered destroyed, Rahimov and his wife Gulnara were each fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage (see F18News 28 June 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2192>).

"Wrong number" ?

Major Shavkat Bekjanov, Deputy Head of Urgench Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department on 7 December answered his phone with his name. But when asked why his colleagues raided the Sunday meeting for worship, he then claimed "it's a wrong number" and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Urgench Police officers who would not give their names referred Forum 18 on 7 December to local police chief Lieutenant Colonel Ilkhom Tajimuradov. But he did not answer his phone whenever called.

Nukus fines, another Bible destruction ordered

In August 2017 police followed a Protestant Pastor from Urgench and others to Kungrad in the neighbouring Karakalpakstan Region. Officers then raided a meeting, searched the house, and confiscated various electronic devices and Christian religious materials including a Bible. A friend of the host who also present during the police raid was summoned to Kungrad Police Station, where they were tortured. Police told Protestants who complained about the torture that "we do not care, you can complain anywhere" (see F18News 19 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326>).

On 4 September one Protestant was jailed in absentia for 15 days and four others were given large fines. Judge Gairat

Khudoyberganov also ordered literature including the Bible to be destroyed (see F18News 19 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326>).

More fines and orders to destroy a Bible have now followed from the same August raid.

On 25 October in Nukus Criminal Court Abatbay Doszhanov was fined 1,497,750 Soms, and Yesnazar Zhumanazarov was fined 2,995,500 Soms. Both were 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").

Also on 25 October Judge Bakhtiyar Torebayev of Kungrad Administrative Court fined Bakhrom Kalbayev and Ahmadjon Nazarov 149,775 Soms each, or the equivalent of one month's minimum monthly salary each. Both were fined under Administrative Code Article 184-2 and 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").

Thirteen other Protestants were given warnings under Administrative Code Article 241. They were 11 local church members - Atabek Safarbayev, Bastzhan Yerniyazov, Ziyaddin Baltabayev, Rustam Kalbayev, Azima Yerniyazova, Sardorbek Janabayev, Sanobar Khudaybergenova, Nabira Khudaybergenova, Bakhitzhan Allaniyazova, Timur Khojaniyazov, Gennadi Chen - and two visiting Russian Protestants.

Judge Torebayev also ordered the destruction of confiscated mobile phones, a tablet device, two Christian videos, and an Uzbek-language Bible.

Judge Torebayev refused to explain to Forum 18 on 7 December why he had imposed the fines and warnings, and ordered the destruction of texts including the Bible.

Courts often order the destruction of confiscated religious literature, including Muslim books or Christian Bibles. This destruction is often carried out by burning (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

More fines to come?

Lieutenant Colonel S. Pirmanov, Head of Nukus Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, and his deputy Senior Lieutenant I. Seytimbetov have also prepared more cases 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 possible penalty is a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

On 5 December Bakhbergen Abdikerimov, Abatbay Doszhanov, Zarina Olimova (Doszhanov's wife), Sarsenbay Khaibrakhmanova, Nazira Dauletmuratova, and Yesnazar Zhumanazarov were given copies of the cases against them, local Protestants who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 December.

Tashkent Region fines imposed as predicted

In the region around the capital Tashkent, police in Yangiyul District raided the private homes of people in the local state-registered Baptist Church and confiscated literature as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed was visiting the country. There were multiple violations of legal procedure in the raids and searches, and Baptists thought that some of those raided would be fined for exercising freedom of religion and belief (see F18News 19 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326>).

The predicted fines have now been imposed. On 14 September Judge Nuraly Zhavliyev of Yangiyul District Administrative Court fined Pastor Fatkhulla Ibrahimov and his wife Nargiza Ibrahimova fined 7,488,750 Soms or 50 times the minimum monthly salary each. Kholiskhon Nishanova was fined 299,550 Soms, or twice the minimum monthly salary. The fines were imposed under the Administrative Code's 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 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

Judge Zhavliyev also ordered destruction of the Christian books and materials confiscated from the Baptists.

On 7 December Judge Zhavliyev refused to explain to Forum 18 why he had imposed the fine and ordered the book destruction. "Even the higher court upheld my decision", he replied. He then claimed that "I cannot talk to you on the phone" and put the phone down.

On 20 October Judge Ulugbek Umurkulov of Tashkent Regional Court upheld Judge Zhavliyev's 14 September decision. Judge Umurkulov refused to talk to Forum 18 on 7 December. "We cannot talk to you on the phone", he claimed and then put the phone down.

Some prisoners of conscience released

On 4 November, six Muslim prisoners of conscience were freed, Muslims who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They were jailed in connected trials for meeting to study the works of theologian Said Nursi and discuss their faith:

- Ikrom Merajov was jailed for nine years in April 2009 (see F18News 29 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289>);

- Ilhom Rajabov was jailed for seven years in June 2010 (see F18News 8 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465>);

- Kamol Odilov was jailed for six years in June 2010 (see F18News 8 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465>) and had his jail term extended in January 2016 on apparently false charges (see F18News 16 February 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2148>);

- Anvar Zaripov was jailed for six years in June 2010 (see F18News 8 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465>);

- Rustam Sharipov was jailed later in 2010 (see F18News 24 March 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941>);

- and Abdullo Rasulov was jailed later in 2010 (see F18News 24 March 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941>).

Muslims who know the released prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief commented that "it was very difficult for them in prison".

Prison conditions in Uzbekistan are harsh, with multiple severe violations of human rights including torture, denials of medical care and of the possibility to read sacred texts and pray openly (see F18News 13 December 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2238>). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2314>.

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>>.

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>.

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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