

17 March 2005

UZBEKISTAN: Will confiscated Baptist literature again be burnt?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18, and Felix Corley, Forum 18

For the third time in recent years, religious literature confiscated from Baptists returning to Uzbekistan has been confiscated. The literature was seized on 6 March from seven church members from Tashkent, together with the car they were travelling in. The seven – who were quizzed for six hours - now face an administrative court, though a customs official insisted to Forum 18 News Service they were being investigated not for importing religious literature but for crossing the border on an unmarked road. "For us as believers, Christian literature is a great treasure, and so we are highly concerned that this time too our literature will be burnt," local Baptists told Forum 18. Religious affairs official Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 that as members of an unregistered church, the seven have no right to import any religious literature, which is subject to vigorous official censorship in Uzbekistan.

Seven members of a Baptist church in the capital Tashkent are to face an administrative court after customs officials confiscated Christian literature and the car they were travelling in after they returned to Uzbekistan from neighbouring Kazakhstan on 6 March. "The court hearing has not taken place yet," Ulugbek Kuvadbekov of the Tashkent regional customs committee told Forum 18 News Service on 17 March. "The investigation is still underway." Local Baptists have complained of the confiscation of the literature and car and the threatened charges against the seven, insisting they did nothing wrong and that they have the right to bring such literature into Uzbekistan. But an official of the government's committee for religious affairs told Forum 18 that as members of an unregistered church, the seven Baptists have no right to import any religious literature.

"This is the third time that official agencies have confiscated Christian literature," members of the Tashkent Baptist church told Forum 18 on 8 March. "In the two previous cases, the confiscated literature was destroyed on orders of the court by burning (we have the documents on this)." Church members fear that their literature will again be destroyed. "For us as believers, Christian literature is a great treasure, and so we are highly concerned that this time too our literature will be burnt."

Kuvadbekov reported that the seven were facing charges – which he refused to specify – for "violating the procedure for crossing the border", insisting they had crossed from Kazakhstan on an unmarked side road where there is no border post. He claimed the literature they were transporting was irrelevant to the case. "They didn't enter Uzbekistan through the proper border crossing, that's all," he told Forum 18. "We have no complaints against the literature. The religious affairs committee told us it is not banned literature."

He said the court will decide what to return to the Baptists. "I'm sure they'll get the car back, but I'm not sure about the literature." Asked why, if the customs service has no complaints against the literature he doubts whether it will be returned, Kuvadbekov refused to respond. "I won't comment on that." He also declined to say what would happen to the literature if it is not returned, though he insisted it would not be burnt. "I have never heard that this has happened," he claimed.

The seven Baptists – N. Yermolayeva, L. Lankina, N. Tsoi, S. Tsoi, O. Usmanova, O. Saidaliyeva and R. Karimov – were detained by customs officers in Tashkent after the Navoi checkpoint on the border with Kazakhstan. Customs officers B. Aripkhojayev and Z. Tashpulatov seized all 1039 items of Christian literature in the car, including 290 copies of Luke's Gospel, 200 copies of Mark's Gospel and copies of Baptist magazines. All the literature was in Russian.

All seven Baptists in the car were detained and questioned for six hours, being freed only late at night. "The interrogators did not respond to a request to show their documents," church members told Forum 18, "and only M. Maksudov identified himself as leader of the group. When the Baptists refused to sign the official report because they did not regard themselves as guilty of anything, they were threatened with imprisonment and Maksudov referred the case to court."

The seven Baptists now face the prospect of fines of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage.

The Tashkent church to which the seven belong is a member of the Baptist Council of Churches, which refuses on principle to register any of its congregations with the state in any of the former Soviet republics where it operates, regarding registration as unacceptable government interference in their religious life.

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs, admitted to Forum 18 that the literature had

been seized from the seven Baptists and that they will be taken to court. "Under the law a registered religious organisation has to submit religious literature for expert analysis before importing it," he told Forum 18. "If it is found that the literature is not extremist and does not contain any incitement to inter-ethnic or inter-religious hatred we will give permission for it to be imported." He claimed that the New Testament and the Bible as a whole may be brought into Uzbekistan "without hindrance", though he was unable to explain why the copies of the Gospels, which form part of the Bible and the New Testament, were seized.

"But the situation is more complex in the case of the Baptists of the Council of Churches," he added. "They are not registered on Uzbek territory and legally we do not have the right to allow them to import literature. Legally, the literature confiscated from them has to be sent back to wherever it came from beyond Uzbekistan's borders. It is not burnt under any circumstances." Kadyrov's denial that confiscated literature was burnt conflicts with the evidence in the two previous Baptist cases.

Kadyrov claimed though that in this case his committee is going to help. "We will register the confiscated literature as the property of the registered Bible Society, and they will then give it to the Baptists," he declared. "It would have been better if they had appealed to us straightaway and then we could have resolved the problem amicably without alerting the whole world."

It remains unclear why the Bible Society is to be involved, as it has no connection to the Council of Churches Baptists.

Uzbekistan operates vigorous censorship of religious literature. Article 19 of the religion law declares that "the delivery and disposal of religious literature that has been published abroad may take place after an expert analysis of its contents in a manner prescribed by law". A list of literature approved for distribution in the country has been drawn up by the religious affairs committee. Literature that is not on this list is confiscated and even burnt.

In one of the earlier cases of confiscation of Baptist literature, 211 copies of a Russian Baptist magazine confiscated from Tashkent Baptist Aleksei Yermolayev on his return to the country were ordered destroyed by a court in April 2003. They were incinerated nine days later (see F18News 9 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=75). "Yermolayev tried to bring the magazines into Uzbekistan illegally," the judge who ordered the destruction and fined Yermolayev told Forum 18 in defence of his ruling. "If the literature was brought into Uzbekistan illegally, then we have the right to destroy it."

Religious literature confiscated from the homes of Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses has also been destroyed under court orders in recent years. After a Jehovah's Witness from Samarkand (Samarqand), Vladimir Kushchevoy, was found guilty in January 2004 of breaking the law on religious education and sentenced to corrective labour, his Bible, New Testament and a further 36 items of religious literature seized at the time of his arrest were ordered destroyed (see F18News 16 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=277). After Pentecostal Bakhrom Nazarov was found guilty of "preaching religious doctrines" last October by a court in Surkhandarya region and fined, Christian literature – including the Bible in Uzbek and the Wisdom of Solomon (the Old Testament Book of Proverbs) – confiscated from him was burnt by the authorities (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455). (END)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105 .

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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