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UZBEKISTAN: Judge defends burning of Baptist magazine

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The judge who ordered the destruction of 211 copies of a Russian Baptist magazine confiscated from local Baptist Aleksei Yermolayev on his return to the country has strongly defended his ruling. "Yermolayev tried to bring the magazines into Uzbekistan illegally," Marat Alimukhamedov told Forum 18 in Tashkent. He says the magazines would have been sent back had Yermolayev declared them at the customs post on the border. "If the literature was brought into Uzbekistan illegally, then we have the right to destroy it," he insisted. Local Baptists have protested against the court-ordered destruction of the magazine and the fine of 23 US dollars handed down. They also complained that Yermolayev was not even informed that the hearing was taking place.

The judge who ordered the destruction of more than 200 copies of a Russian Baptist magazine confiscated from local Baptist Aleksei Yermolayev on his return to the country has strongly defended his ruling. "Yermolayev tried to bring the magazines into Uzbekistan illegally," Marat Alimukhamedov told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent on 6 June. "He was detained not on the border, but right on Uzbek territory." Alimukhamedov says the magazines would have been sent back had Yermolayev declared them at the customs post on the border. "If the literature was brought into Uzbekistan illegally, then we have the right to destroy it," he insisted. Local Baptists have protested against the court-ordered destruction of the magazine and the fine handed down.

Yermolayev was detained on 2 April at customs control point no. 7 in Tashkent after an inspection, local Baptists reported in a 23 May statement reaching Forum 18. A total of 211 copies of the Russian-language Baptist magazine Vestnik Istiny (Herald of Truth) were confiscated from him.

On 15 April the Tashkent city court found Yermolayev guilty of breaking Article 225 (violation of the customs law) of the Code of Administrative Offences for trying to bring the magazines into the country. Judge Alimukhamedov fined him 22,675 sums (163 Norwegian kroner, 20 Euros or 23 US dollars), five times the minimum monthly wage, and ordered the material evidence – the copies of the magazine – to be destroyed. Local Baptists reported that Document 1470 of 24 April confirmed that the magazines had been burnt that day.

"The court case took place in Yermolayev's absence," the Baptists complained. "He received no summons to appear in court, although in the court's verdict it was indicated that Yermolayev had several times failed to respond to summonses without good reason."

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs, defended the confiscation of the magazines but not their destruction. "Vestnik Istiny is a magazine issued by the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists. That organisation is not registered on our country and therefore may not distribute its literature in Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18 on 6 June in Tashkent. Kadyrov stressed that no-one would obstruct the import of religious literature from an unregistered organisation if it was for personal use. "If Yermolayev had brought in one or two magazines, then he would not have had a problem. But you will agree that if someone brings in 211 magazines then clearly he intends to distribute them."

On the other hand, Kadyrov maintained that confiscated literature should not be destroyed but sent back to the country from which the attempt was made to import it. "We are not in favour of destroying books, even if they promote the ideas of dubious sects," Kadyrov told Forum 18. He also asked Forum 18 for the address of the court where Yermolayev's case had been heard "in order to establish what happened".

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