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UZBEKISTAN: Government attacks on Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims continue

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Uzbekistan's last legal Jehovah's Witness congregation is being threatened with closure, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. If this happens, it would make the faith illegal in the country and liable to harsh penalties. Also, several Protestant churches have been closed in the past month, while raids, fines and police interrogations continue. Some churches have had to give up holding full church services and can meet only quietly in small groups. On 18 December a Pentecostal in Tashkent was set upon by four men and brutally beaten. "The local imams turned to the mafia and they became involved," one Protestant told Forum 18. The attack follows state TV encouragement of religious intolerance and attacks on religious freedom – targeting Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in particular. Meanwhile, further restrictions – for examples obstacles to the practice of daily prayer – have been imposed on the Muslim population of the strongly Islamic Fergana Valley area.

In a new challenge to Uzbekistan's tight restrictions on religious activity, the Council of Churches Baptists have issued a detailed complaint about the country's Religion Law and articles of the Criminal and Administrative Codes which restrict religious freedom. "Religious services have been broken up," they told Forum 18 News Service on 7 December. "Believers have been forcibly taken to police stations, after which cases have been drawn up and handed over to the courts. Fines have been imposed, even when just a few people have come together for prayer in a private flat."

The Baptist challenge comes as the authorities step up their anti-Protestant and anti-Jehovah's Witness propaganda through the state media (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890). The authorities also appear to be about to deprive of registration – and thus of legal existence – the last remaining Jehovah's Witness community in the country, while new controls on Muslim practice have been imposed in the Andijan [Andijon] region in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley.

The sharply increased penalties in the Criminal and Administrative Codes introduced in June are a particular focus of the Baptist's complaint (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805). "Under the new laws an individual's possession of two copies of the Bible can serve as a reason to instigate an administrative or criminal case. The second copy will be considered as 'storing with the aim of distributing'." They add that the same restrictions apply to importing religious literature. They complain also of the burning of confiscated religious literature and the punishment of those who have imported it.

Council of Churches Baptists reject registration in all the former Soviet republics where they operate. Under Uzbekistan's draconian religious laws, all unregistered religious activity is – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – illegal and punishable (see the F18News religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777).

The Baptists call for missionary activity to be decriminalised, for Christian literature to be allowed to be freely imported, owned or distributed, and for the requirement that religious communities be registered before they can legally function to be annulled "so that believers can hold services and praise God without obstruction".

They complain of the latest fine and court order to burn Christian literature in what they call "continuing persecution" from the authorities. On 25 November, Judge B. Botirov, of the Pap District Criminal Court in Namangan Region, fined 35-year-old Nikolai Zulfikarov 12,420 Soms (62 Norwegian Kroner, 8 Euros, or 10 US Dollars) under Article 241 of the Administrative Code. This punishes "failing to observe the correct procedure for teaching religious beliefs". Baptists told Forum 18 that the court found Zulfikarov's activity to be illegal, but gave him a low fine given his material situation.

The verdict declared that Zulfikarov's offence was speaking "without registration in the decreed manner" and without "specialised" religious education "in private" about his faith to four local people on 3 November in his own home in the village of Halkabad. This home service was raided by the police, who confiscated books and tapes.

The verdict noted that "literature, journals of a religious tendency, manuscripts written by others and audio cassettes" were used as proof in the case. A 15 November "expert analysis" of the confiscated materials had found that they were Baptist and "basically represent materials of missionaries (religious propagandists)", the verdict reported, but added that the analysis had not found

anything against the constitutional order of Uzbekistan or calls for the seizure of power. The analysis claimed that the audio tapes – recordings of Baptist meetings in Russia – represented agitation for unregistered Baptist congregations. "Calls like this could lead to social and family differences of opinion," the verdict noted.

"The confiscated material evidence, as a result of the conclusions of the textual expert assessment - given that all calls and agitation to join illegal societies represent a threat to social security and cause differences of opinion in families and dissatisfaction – are to be destroyed."

Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 7 December that they are calling for prayer and appeals for the fine to be annulled and for the return of the confiscated literature and audio-tapes.

On several occasions, courts in Uzbekistan have ordered the destruction by burning of Christian and Hare Krishna literature confiscated during police raids, the most recent case known to Forum 18 being by a court in Karshi in October (see F18News 27 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=877).

Several Protestant churches have been closed across Uzbekistan in the past month, while raids, fines and police interrogations continue. Protestants have told Forum 18 that they fear further reprisals if the exact details of the closures are published. Some Protestant churches have had to give up holding full church services and can meet only quietly in small groups. Also, on 18 December a Pentecostal church worker in Tashkent was set upon by four men and brutally beaten. "The local imams turned to the mafia and they became involved," one Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent. "The government is stirring up the Muslim population against Christians."

State-run national television has recently broadcast programmes explicitly and directly encouraging religious intolerance and attacking religious freedom, targeting the Protestant and Jehovah's Witness religious minorities in particular. Protestants have expressed grave concern to Forum 18 about the impact of these programmes, suggesting that one of their goals may have been to prepare Uzbek citizens for a further repression of religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890).

Despite its numerous anti-religious measures attacking religious freedom, the government has stepped up its efforts to try to convince the world that it respects religious tolerance and religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=891).

Also threatened with closure is Uzbekistan's last legal Jehovah's Witness community, in Chirchik (Chirchiq) near Tashkent. "Our community in Chirchik was warned to correct what officials claim was wrong in its practice within one month, otherwise we would lose our registration," Jehovah's Witnesses sources told Forum 18 on 20 December. "This looks very similar to the way they closed down our community in Fergana earlier this year." The community filed its corrections with the authorities head of the deadline imposed of 17 December. The authorities have not yet responded.

On 17 November the Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a legal challenge to the Fergana regional justice department's decision to strip the Fergana community of registration (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837). "The accusations had no basis apart from a few technical corrections," they told Forum 18. Judge Elza Yunn invited the community to Fergana city court for the first hearing on 14 December and the second on 19 December, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported. "The judge did not accept the request of the community to have audio or video recording of the trial." The next hearing is scheduled for 21 December.

Only two of the more than 30 Jehovah's Witness communities across Uzbekistan have ever been able to get registration, but the stripping of registration from the Fergana community and the threat to the continued legal existence of the Chirchik community could see Uzbekistan's entire Jehovah's Witness community being declared illegal under the country's draconian laws on religion. Jehovah's Witness communities are frequently raided, especially during the one festival they mark each year, the memorial of Christ's death. Raids on those commemorations have become an annual ritual (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763).

The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that they are considering taking a case over the memorial raids to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which monitors how individual governments implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The government's Religious Affairs Committee – which administers the compulsory, prior censorship of all religious literature published in the country or imported into it - has denied the Jehovah's Witness community permission to import 500 copies of the Bible in Russian and the same number of copies of a Russian-language book "What does the Bible actually teach?" In a 16 October response to the Jehovah's Witness application lodged nearly three months earlier – seen by Forum 18 - the Committee's deputy chairman Artykbek Yusupov describes the import of the literature as "inexpedient" for the Jehovah's Witnesses' "only functioning organisation on the territory of the republic" – despite the fact that more than 30 Jehovah's Witness communities actually exist in Uzbekistan. The Committee allows only registered religious organisations to apply for permission to import religious literature, and censorship controls have been tightened this year (see F18News 29 June 2006

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

Yusupov argues that the permission the Committee had given the Jehovah's Witnesses to import 504 copies of the Bible in 2004 and a further 992 copies in 2005, together with 500 copies of "What does the Bible actually teach?", was enough. Yusupov accused the Jehovah's Witness leadership of "deception" by trying to import the same books earlier this year as humanitarian aid, an accusation the Jehovah's Witnesses rejected to Forum 18.

The majority Muslim religious community is also being attacked by the Uzbek government. The new Hokim (head of administration) of Andijan region, Ahmadjan Usmonov, introduced a range of restrictions on Muslim practice, the Russian-based news website Ferghana.ru reported on 29 November. The azan (call to prayer) can no longer sound from mosques five times a day, while mullahs have been banned from preaching at weddings.

The website quoted a 70-year-old resident of Andijan, Rahmonjon, who is confined to bed and cannot get to the nearby mosque. He was quoted as expressing his surprise not to hear the azan before he found out about the hokim's order. "Several years ago Muslims were banned from calling the faithful to prayer with the aid of a microphone," he declared, "and now the azan has been banned completely." Ferghana.ru said local Muslims initially believed the new order was merely a continuation of the ban on using loudspeakers, but were surprised to find out that the azan had been completely banned.

Complaining of increased controls on mosques was another Andijan resident, Azimboi Tulyaganov. "Underage adolescents are not allowed in," the agency quoted him as saying. "And if young people don't learn to read the namaz and the Koran now, when will they do so?" Systematic repression of Muslims has increased in recent months (see F18News 2 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=864).

Ferghana.ru reported that anyone violating the ban on hosting Muslim preachers at weddings could face a fine of up to 500,000 sums. It quoted local legal specialist D. R. (full name not given) as complaining that this ban violates the Uzbek Constitution. "How to conduct a wedding – whether with a preacher or musicians – is the personal affair of individuals." The specialist described the hokim's instructions as "a war against Islam".

The news agency added that in late November a new local instruction had also come into force banning people from praying at their places of work. Ferghana.ru cited a worker at Andijan's medical institute as reporting that the chief doctor had ordered the closure of prayer rooms in the institute. "I always conducted the five-times daily namaz, as my age already forces me to do so," the elderly worker reported. "It will be a sin if I have to abandon performing the namaz because of work."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why the Hokim has ordered these new restrictions on Muslim practice. Officials at the Andijan regional administration referred Forum 18 to the press office, but the telephone there went unanswered between 18 and 20 December. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths 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=777.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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