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UZBEKISTAN: Severe literature censorship continues

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

Uzbekistan continues to maintain severe religious literature censorship, Forum 18 News Service notes. Current examples include two shipments of Jehovah's Witness literature – one in transit for Tajikistan and one intended for an Uzbek congregation – which have been held for more than a year. Other religious communities, such as Protestants and Muslims, also experience problems. A Protestant, involved in sending literature requested by Christians in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 that most shipments never arrived. "This was either through postal inefficiency or because it was rejected at Uzbek customs," the Protestant stated. "So we have given up trying to send literature." Many who would like to receive literature are afraid of the consequences of being identified by the authorities as Christians, from their receiving literature by post. Uzbek officials are reluctant to discuss the issue, but insist that religious material can only be received after specific approval by the state Religious Affairs Committee. Uzbekistan frequently burns religious literature, including the Bible, confiscated from Muslims, Protestants, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses. Even legally imported literature is confiscated in police raids.

Uzbek religious communities continue to be subject to a policy of severe religious literature censorship by the authorities, Forum 18 News Service notes. One example of this is two large shipments of religious literature shipped from Germany for Jehovah's Witnesses, which have been held by Uzbek customs officials for more than a year. One of the shipments was sent to local Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses, while the other was in transit on its way to Tajikistan. A number of other religious communities have also complained about the continued difficulty of sending religious literature to Uzbekistan. However, Uzbekistan's International Post Office continues to insist that religious books and print materials can only be received in Uzbekistan only after they have been specifically approved by the state Religious Affairs Committee.

The Jehovah's Witness shipment for their Chirchik [Chirchiq] congregation, near the capital Tashkent, was seized in Tashkent on 23 August 2006. It consisted of 500 Bibles and 500 Bible study aid books in Russian. "Our representatives have had meetings with the Chairman of the Religious Affairs Committee, Artybek Yusupov, with the aim to reach a peaceful settlement so that the shipment could be released," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 17 October. "We continue our efforts in this direction of diplomacy, with further meetings." Jehovah's Witnesses increasingly fear that all their religious activities in Uzbekistan will be banned (see F18News 21 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1009)

A number of Christian and Muslim organisations have also faced difficulty sending their literature to Uzbekistan. One Christian organisation in Kazakhstan told Forum 18 that they sent a shipment of books to Uzbekistan in 2004, which was returned with a letter of explanation from the International Post Office of Uzbekistan that they should further not send any religious literature to Uzbekistan, which they have not done ever since (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

The Jehovah's Witness shipment in transit for Tajikistan was seized at the Karakul-VED customs post in Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region on 27 August 2006, and consisted of 1,362 kilograms [1.3 UK tons or 1.5 US tons] of religious literature. Jehovah's Witnesses recently met Tashkent city and national customs officials in the capital Tashkent on 28 September 2007, as this office controls Bukhara Region Customs. The State Customs Committee told Jehovah's Witnesses that they had discussed the issue with the Department of Customs Control, and the sender in Germany has also been in contact with the Uzbekistan Embassy in the German capital Berlin. "Our aim is to reach a peaceful settlement and to have the literature returned to Germany or readdressed to another country in the region where it may be released and used," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "We continue with diplomatic efforts."

It is unclear whether last week's Tajik government ban on all Jehovah's Witness activity in that country will affect this shipment (see F18News 18 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036).

Forum 18 tried to reach Customs officials in Tashkent and Bukhara on 16 and 17 October. They were reluctant to talk and kept referring Forum 18 to different phone numbers. The Deputy Chief of Customs Control of Bukhara Regional Customs, Arif Mahmudov, advised Forum 18 on 19 October to call Tashkent Customs Authorities to find out what happened to the shipment of religious literature seized in transit for Tajikistan. Reached by Forum 18 on 19 October, the head of the Investigation Department of Tashkent Customs, Nadiraev (who did not give his first name), did not want to talk about either of the literature shipments. On

hearing Forum 18 begin to question him he put down the phone.

Begzot Kadyrov, Deputy Chairman of the state Religious Affairs Committee, also refused to talk about the issue and told Forum 18 to contact the information centre at the Foreign Ministry. Told that Forum 18's questions related to the Committee's work, Kadyrov put down the phone.

One Protestant in Russia, involved in trying to send literature requested by Christians in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 that most of the literature never arrived. "This was either through postal inefficiency or because it was rejected at Uzbek customs," the Protestant stated. "So we have given up trying to send literature." The Protestant added that many who would like to receive literature are afraid of the consequences of being identified by the authorities as Christians, from their receiving literature by post.

In 2006 Uzbekistan tightened its religious literature censorship rules, imposing new penalties for the "illegal" production, storage, import and distribution of all forms of religious literature. Some Muslims stressed to Forum 18 that the changes merely gave a "legal" basis to what was already going on, one Muslim noting – as the authorities confirmed to Forum 18 – that since the crushing of the May 2005 Andijan uprising, all imports of Muslim literature had been halted. The Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that the "illegal" production and distribution of religious literature are "home-produced materials. In any state a publisher must receive a licence to conduct publishing activity and pay taxes." These changes followed a series of moves cracking down on activities the government does not totally control (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

The Deputy Director of Uzbekistan's International Post Office, Ahror Hadjaev, confirmed to Forum 18 on 17 October that books and print materials go through routine customs checking at customs points in Uzbekistan. "When the customs officers discover books and other materials of a religious nature they send samples to the Religious Affairs Committee for checking," he said. "Just recently we received 50 Korans in Arabic, so we sent two samples to the Committee. Ideally it should not take more than two or three days for the Committee to respond whether or not to ban the materials." Asked whether Jehovah's Witnesses books are completely banned in Uzbekistan, he responded that he could not say because it is generally rare that the customs return books to their senders. Religious Affairs Committee inspection of religious literature sent by post is routine practice (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

Uzbekistan's authorities have frequently burned books, including the Bible, imported without permission or confiscated in raids within the country. Targets of the book-burning policy have included material produced by Muslims, Protestants, Hare Krishna devotees or Jehovah's Witnesses confiscated at border customs posts (see eg. F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527) and seized during raids within the country (see 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643).

The destruction of confiscated religious material still continues (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936), and even legally imported material is confiscated in raids (see F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012).

During 2007 there has been an increasing tendency for the authorities to jail members of the Protestant and Jehovah's Witness religious minorities. One example is Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Dmitry Shestakov, who is now serving a four year labour camp sentence (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982).

The authorities, as well as cracking down on religious activity they do not like, also subject all religious communities to secret and open surveillance by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

All religious communities are also experiencing greater repression by the authorities. Amongst numerous recent examples have been a crackdown on Protestant activity across Uzbekistan (see F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019); bans on sermons and children at Muslim Night prayers in the month of Ramadan (see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1020); police knife threats against a Protestant church leader (see F18News 4 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1029); and a nationwide manhunt being launched to find a Pentecostal who is claimed by Uzbek police to have "gathered people in his home for religious activity" (see F18News 12 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1034). (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.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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