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UZBEKISTAN: "People have a right to know"

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The import and production of religious literature in Uzbekistan remains under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible, Forum 18 News Service has found. Defending the practice of not importing Islamic texts, a student at the state-controlled Islamic University told Forum 18 that "I don't think scholars from other countries are better than ours. We have no need to import from abroad." Imam Obidkhon Nazarov, the exiled former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque, told Forum 18 that even books by renowned Muslim scholars were no longer published. Nazarov emphasized that "people have a right to know. If there are good books on Islam and the Koran published abroad, why should people be deprived of opportunities to read them," he asked. Religious minorities have also fallen foul of the state's tight web of censorship laws and regulations. Christians are concerned about a shipment of Bibles and related books held by customs since May. Jehovah's Witnesses are concerned about a shipment held since August 2006. In both cases, there is the possibility of extremely expensive official charges for storage being imposed on religious minorities.

Religious literature in Uzbekistan remains under tight government control, Forum 18 News Service has found. Both the import and production of literature – including texts such as the Koran and the Bible - is strictly controlled, with compulsory prior censorship by the state Religious Affairs Committee. Only registered communities can ask for the state's permission to import material, all unregistered religious activity being a criminal offence.

Literature about the majority Islamic faith is kept under strict state control, with relatively little allowed to be published in Uzbekistan and none imported officially, Muslims have told Forum 18. Jasur Najmiddinov, a student studying for a master's degree at the capital Tashkent's Islamic University, states that more than 800 titles on Islam have been published since 1991. All the titles are, he said, in Uzbek or Karakalpak, a Turkic language spoken in north-western Uzbekistan (a region of the country subject to severe repression of religious freedom – see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019). Najmiddinov said Muslim books are on sale "everywhere", including at mosques and at markets.

Students and staff of the state-controlled Islamic University are closely monitored by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014). Najmiddinov has taken part in and defended his part in a programme encouraging religious hatred, which state TV has repeatedly broadcast (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

"Those who write books give the text to the Religious Affairs Committee which conducts the expert assessment on them," Najmiddinov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 June. He appeared to welcome the Religious Affairs Committee's power to decide when books can and cannot be produced or imported. "When the Committee says no it means that Uzbek people don't need a certain book," he told Forum 18.

Najmiddinov said Muslim books are not routinely imported from abroad, whether from the Middle East or from Russia. "I don't think scholars from other countries are better than ours," he told Forum 18. "We have no need to import from abroad." He said that he could not say whether importing Islamic literature from abroad is banned or discouraged by the government. He said Muslim scholars travelling abroad can import a few books privately "if they don't contain elements representing the views of extremist sects". He declined to explain what he meant by this.

Imam Obidkhon Nazarov, the former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque who had to flee Uzbekistan because of threats to his life, confirmed to Forum 18 from abroad on 1 July that religious literature is severely controlled. "I even know of cases in the past year where the police arrested people claiming that they were terrorists", he said, "when a Koran written in Arabic was found in their house".

Uzbekistan's International Post Office confirmed to Forum 18 in 2007 that imported copies of the Koran in Arabic were censored by the state Religious Affairs Committee (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039).

Imam Nazarov told Forum 18 that, although many Islamic books are published in Uzbekistan, some of those books are heretical in

the view of orthodox Islam. "I have even seen sorcery books in the Uzbek language published as if they were Islamic books", Nazarov emphasized. He stated that the government would not allow any book not in line with ideology to be published. "Each and every book must go through tight government censorship before being published", he reiterated.

Nazarov told that Islam does not know boundaries, so limiting Islam to Uzbekistan and Uzbek scholars is "ignorance". "People have a right to know", he stressed. "If there are good books on Islam and the Koran published abroad, why should people be deprived of opportunities to read them," he asked.

Nazarov said that some Islamic books by Uzbek authors are not being published any more. "For instance, the famous Imam Bukhari, who every Uzbek has heard of, is not being published", he said. Very soon after Uzbekistan's independence a few thousand copies of Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari's book 'Sahih al-Bukhari' was published in one printing only, Nazarov stated. This is a collection of hadith which Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic hadith compilation. Imam Bukhari was a renowned Imam from the Bukhara [Bukhoro] region of Uzbekistan, who lived in the 9th century A.D., explained Imam Nazarov. "What is a few thousand copies for 15 million Uzbek speakers in the country," he asked. However, the "useless" books of Uzbek politicians are published with hundreds of thousands in circulation, Nazarov stated.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov in May 2008 published a book entitled "Morality Is Invincible Power". Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported on 19 May that Uzbek state TV's coverage of the book launch included participants praising the book as "the best book on philosophy and morality since the times of Socrates." RFE/RL reported that university students are required to take exams every year on Karimov's books.

Neither the state Religious Affairs Committee, nor the state-controlled Muslim Board (the Muftiate, or Islamic religious leadership), was willing to respond to Forum 18's questions on 1 July. In 2006, the then chair of the Committee, Shoazim Minovarov, admitted to Forum 18 that the import of foreign Muslim literature had practically ceased in the wake of the crackdown on the Andijan uprising in May 2005 (see F18News 2 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=864).

Censorship of religious literature entering the country was introduced in 1998, when the country's Religion Law was made much harsher. Article 19 of the Law bans the "manufacture, storage and distribution of printed items, films, photographs, audio and video recordings and other materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism". It also states that: "Delivery and distribution of religious literature published abroad is done after expert analysis of its contents is carried out in the order prescribed by law." Publication of religious literature within Uzbekistan is also subject to compulsory prior censorship. Article 241-1 of the Criminal Code makes "harbouring and distributing" such documents punishable by up to three years in jail.

The definition of whether material falls into these categories is carried out by the state's Religious Affairs Committee or - in provincial areas - by teachers at local university philosophy departments even though this is not legal. Mainstream Islamic theological tracts are often deemed to be extremist (see F18News 12 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=361). The authorities have been known to break their own laws on "expert examination" of literature. Protestant pastor Dmitry Shestakov was in 2007 sentenced to four years' imprisonment, and among the trial irregularities was "expert" examination of literature by the Department of Uzbek History at Andijan [Andijon] State University. Under an April 2004 Cabinet of Ministers decree, any expert examination of religious materials must be conducted by the Religious Affairs Committee (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

In 2006, 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 Andijan uprising, all imports of Muslim literature have halted. The state 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," the then Chair of the Committee stated. The changes were the latest in a series cracking down on activities the state does not totally control (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

There appear to be at least tentative plans to harshen the Religion Law (see F18News 5 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1043).

Religious literature is frequently confiscated from communities of a variety of faiths during raids. Courts often rule that such literature - which can include copies of the Bible - be destroyed. Even legally imported religious material is confiscated in police raids (see eg. F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012).

Religious minorities are also victims of the state's tight censorship. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians remain highly concerned about a shipment of Bibles and Bible-related books that have been held up in customs in the capital Tashkent since 19 May, Protestant sources have told Forum 18. The shipment was sent from the Russian Bible Society to the Uzbek Bible Society, a registered organisation. However, Forum 18 has learnt that the government's Religious Affairs Committee, which operates the compulsory religious literature censorship in Uzbekistan, has not yet authorised the shipment's release. Although the Committee has failed to write to the Bible Society about the shipment, Christians told Forum 18 that the Customs say the Committee has written to

them to say the shipment must be removed from Uzbekistan.

Christians fear that if the Bibles are not released within the two month period they can be held at customs they will automatically be required to be removed from Uzbekistan, which can be very costly. Sources have told Forum 18 that importers are liable for storage fees while goods are held in Uzbek customs.

Despite the lack of an official written response from the Committee, officials of the Committee appear to have been briefing sympathetic journalists that the shipment is illegal and that the Bible Society tried to break the law by importing them "illegally". The Azerbaijani news agency Trend quoted unnamed Committee officials on 19 June as stating that the Bible Society had tried to import the books "without agreement and permission from the state authorities". It said that the Justice Ministry had issued the Bible Society with an official warning about "impermissible, even illegal actions".

Christians Forum 18 has spoken to reject these allegations, insisting that the Bible Society applied for permission in full accordance with the official procedure.

Forum 18 tried to speak to Begzot Kadyrov of the State Religious Affairs Committee on 1 July about the Bible Society shipment and other literature problems in Uzbekistan. However Kadyrov's number went unanswered throughout the day.

The Bible Society shipment consists of 11,000 copies of various books in Uzbek (in both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets) and Karakalpak. The Society was founded in 1993 by representatives of various Christian denominations, including Russian Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. It gained legal status in 1994 and remains the only legal interdenominational religious organisation in Uzbekistan. It has already produced Uzbek translations of four books of the Old Testament, with a further seven in preparation. It is planning to produce a full Uzbek Bible translation in 2009.

Uzbekistan's postal authorities have all but halted the delivery of parcels of books sent to individuals in Uzbekistan from abroad. Such parcels have been returned to senders in recent years with a letter informing them that such literature is banned and telling them not to send it in future. An official of the international post office in Tashkent told Forum 18 in 2005 that a van takes each day's load of religious books to the Committee for censorship. He claimed that most religious literature is passed, but the high number of rejections suggests otherwise (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

Uzbekistan also operates a system of internet censorship which has blocked access to a number of foreign religious websites, including the Moscow-based religious news website Portal-credo.ru (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941).

Other religious communities have also faced obstruction in importing religious literature. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that members of their congregation in Chirchik [Chirchiq] – the only one in Uzbekistan that still has legal status – have trying to obtain the release by Uzbek customs officials of a shipment of 500 Russian-language Bibles and 500 Russian-language books "What Does the Bible Really Teach?". The books have been held in Customs since August 2006. Despite intermittent verbal promises from the authorities in the past, they have not been released (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039).

A Jehovah's Witness from Kazakhstan told Forum 18 on 1 July that Uzbek Customs will not release the books. "They told us that the only way for us to get our books back is to pay Customs for storage, which is over 13 million Uzbek Soms [50,000 Norwegian Kroner, 6,000 Euros, or 10,000 US Dollars]," he said. Only then would the books be returned from Uzbekistan, the authorities told the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Jehovah's Witnesses replied that they cannot pay the amount demanded, as it is much greater than the actual cost of the books.

Uzbek customs also told the Jehovah's Witnesses that they could not destroy the books, as they were Bibles, and neither could Customs release them to the Witnesses there. "Now every day the storage costs are increasing," the Jehovah's Witness complained. "We are afraid that the authorities may even use that against our members in Chirchik."

Christian literature confiscated from Protestants, including copies of the Bible, has been burnt by the authorities in the past (see F18News 27 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=877).

Shipments of religious literature, including literature in transit, have in the past also been blocked by Uzbek customs officials. One 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 (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039). (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 on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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