

2 April 2009

UZBEKISTAN: "We just need to make sure what they teach in their homes"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan continues to penalise people who distribute religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. In two separate cases, Baptists from registered and unregistered churches are facing prosecution, fines and literature confiscations for distributing and possessing religious literature. In the case involving members of a registered church, a local official told Forum 18 that "we just need to make sure what they teach in their homes, and they need to get special permission to have religious activity in a private home." In another case in the north-west of the country, Kurbangul Aveniyazova has been tried in her absence for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials" and fined 20 times the minimum monthly salary. An Uzbek-language Bible and other material was also ordered to be destroyed. Asked why she ordered the Bible to be destroyed, the Judge told Forum 18 that she had received religious expert opinion that it was not authorised. The Chair of the regional state Religious Affairs Committee abruptly terminated the phone call before Forum 18 could ask why they had given an expert opinion that the Bible in Uzbek was unauthorised.

Uzbekistan continues to penalise people who distribute religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. Baptists Artur Alpaev and Aleksandr Avdeev face a criminal investigation, in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona], for distributing Christian literature on the street. Two other Baptists from the capital Tashkent, Pavel Nenno and Olga Smirnova, who unlike the Fergana Baptists are from a state-registered church, face administrative penalties for teaching children and holding unauthorised religious literature in a private home. And in north-western Uzbekistan, a criminal court on 24 February fined a Protestant, Kurbangul Aveniyazova, for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials."

The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 about these and other cases on 31 March.

Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees are also among those who face punishment for holding or sharing their literature amid the government's harsh censorship. The import, production and distribution of all religious literature remains under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Baptists in Fergana have urged an end to the ban on people sharing their beliefs with others. "It is very difficult to bring Christian literature into the country, and so for us each book is precious," they told Forum 18 from Fergana on 20 March. "From our experience we know that literature confiscated for an expert analysis is usually destroyed after a court hearing. The fact that New Testaments, Gospels and individual books of the Bible are subject to destruction testifies to the serious violations of human rights."

A criminal case has been started by the Fergana city Prosecutor's Office against Alpaev and Avdeev, as they run a street library, Protestants who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. They are being investigated under Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations". The case has been sent to the Investigation Department of the Fergana City Police, where it is being led by Chief of Department Alisher Irisov.

Alpaev and Avdeev were among four members of the local Council of Churches Baptist congregation - who refuse to register with the state - detained by the police and National Security (NSS) secret police on 27 December 2008, for offering literature to passers-by on the street. The two other church members, Vladimir Andoniu and Vladimir Potekhin, were given heavy fines under the Administrative Code in February (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262).

Baptists told Forum 18 from Fergana that police again prevented church members from offering their literature on the street on 14 March. Two police officers approached Alpaev and two other church members, Vera Beryaleva and Elena Kim, and confiscated all the literature they had with them. They said it would be sent for an "expert analysis". They did not give the church members any record of the confiscation.

The Baptists point out that Alpaev has already been punished under the Administrative Code and that this would count as a second "offence". "A third would be considered a criminal matter and would face a harsher punishment than a fine."

Zohid Madaminov, the Deputy Chief of Investigation Department of Fergana City Police insisted to Forum 18 on 2 April that the Baptists were not supposed to distribute books on the street. "Books must be sold or distributed in bookshops or libraries."

Deputy Chief Madaminov played down the Baptists' concerns over possible criminal charges. "There is nothing to worry about," he insisted, "The Chief [Irisov] talked to them this morning [2 April], and it will soon be over." Madaminov said "only" administrative charges could be brought in this case.

Avdeev has already been punished under the Administrative Code for his religious activity. In September 2008, Fergana City Criminal Court found him guilty of violating Article 184-2, which punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials". He was fined and the literature confiscated from him – including Bibles – was ordered destroyed (see F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195). Avdeev's appeals were rejected in October and December 2008. Alpaev similarly has faced fines and imprisonment under the Administrative Code for his religious activity (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262).

In a separate case in Sergeli District of Tashkent, eight secret police officers, together with other local officials, raided the private home of Pavel Nenno at lunchtime on 27 March, Protestants told Forum 18. Nenno is a deacon at a registered Baptist congregation. Present were a number of children from poor local families he regularly feeds. During the raid, officers seized 77 Christian books and magazines, as well as 33 discs and 28 videotapes with Christian films as well as children's posters and his computer.

The operation was led by Captain Rustam Ergashev of the NSS secret police, who was also accompanied by the District Hokim (administration chief) and officials of the Fire Safety Department, the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service and the mahalla committee (local self-government). Protestants complain that the Fire Safety Department and the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service had no right to intervene as this is a private home, not a firm or organisation.

Although Nenno and Smirnova belong to a registered church, Batyr Shayislamov, Sergeli District's Deputy Hokim insisted to Forum 18 on 2 April that Nenno needs to register the religious activity in his home with the Ministry of Justice, and also inform the local mahalla committee (self-government) and the executive authorities about "all their activity." Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov admitted that, alongside law-enforcement agencies, he also participated in the raid. "We needed to know why people gathered in his [Nenno's] home," he told Forum 18 on 2 April from Tashkent. "They gathered 30-35 children in Nenno's home, and taught religion, which, according to our laws, is forbidden." He said by doing so, the Baptists instilled in them religious views. Asked whether Baptist teachings were banned in Uzbekistan, he said, "We just need to make sure what they teach in their homes, and they need to get special permission to have religious activity in their private home."

Following the raid on 27 March, Nenno and Olga Smirnova, who was cooking at the time, were taken to the Sergeli District police station for questioning. Later Smirnova was released. However, Nenno was locked in a cell that evening at the police station, "where he was illegally held for the next 18 and a half hours even though they had already established his identity," local Protestants complained to Forum 18. He was freed at lunchtime on 28 March.

The books and recordings seized from Nenno have been sent for an "expert analysis" to the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Local Protestants fear both Nenno and Smirnova will face charges under four Articles of the Administrative Code: Article 53, which punishes "violation of sanitary laws"; Article 211, which punishes "violation of fire safety procedures"; Article 240, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations; and Article 241, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religion".

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov said it is "up to the law-enforcement agencies now" how to punish the Baptists.

In the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], Nukus district Criminal Court, under Judge Bardagul Bekzhanova, has tried an administrative case against Kurbanul Aveniyazova. She is a 56 year old resident of Khazhan village, and was tried in her absence under article 184 part 2 of the Administrative Code for "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials." Aveniyazova was fined 560,800 Soms (2,550 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros, or 390 US Dollars). The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low.

A Bible in the Uzbek language, nine DVD disks of Christian films confiscated from her were ordered to be destroyed by the same court decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen. The court decision was delivered to Aveniyazova by post on 31 March.

Judge Bekzhanova defended her decision, saying that Aveniyazova was not allowed to teach religion privately and distribute unauthorised religious literature. "I gave her the mildest possible punishment for the kind of violation," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 2 April. Asked why she ordered the Bible to be destroyed, she said she had received religious expert opinion that the

confiscated materials were not authorised. "Aveniyazova can still make an appeal," she reported, "Maybe she will get her Bible back." Bekzhanova said that according to the law, material evidence must be destroyed after a case is completed. She did not state why the court decision was delivered to the defendant, who lives in the same district, 39 days after the verdict.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee why they had given an expert opinion that the Bible in the Uzbek language was unauthorised. Nurulla Zhamolov, the Committee's Chair, did not want to talk to Forum 18 and abruptly terminated the phone call.

Forum 18 also knows of a case in Gulistan, in the south-western Syrdarya region, where on 29 March an unregistered Baptist church's Sunday morning worship meeting was raided. 15 law-enforcement officials with video-cameras broke into the Church service. Protestants from Syrdarya told Forum 18 that Gulistan city Police officers recorded every church member present at the service, and confiscated three boxes of children's Bibles.

Raids on other Protestant communities continue, in one case involving a Russian Orthodox priest taking part in a police, NSS secret police and local authority raid (see F18News 31 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1276).

Muslims face particularly harsh punishments for religious activity, and the authorities are in the middle of a crackdown on followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Five Nursi followers were given harsh prison sentences in Tashkent in February (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262). At least nine others accused of following Said Nursi remain in prison in Bukhara awaiting trial (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265).

Short-term imprisonments of Protestants, for unregistered religious activity, also happened in March (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270). (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=1170.

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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