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UZBEKISTAN: Internet censorship continues

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Uzbekistan continues to impose widespread and swift internet censorship on Russian-language websites, Forum 18 News Service notes. This was demonstrated on 9 March, when internet users in the country were blocked from viewing a Russian-language news article on Lenta.ru (reposted from Uznews.net) about the difficulties a bearded Muslim in Samarkand encountered in getting a passport. The Russian news website Ferghana.ru – which reported the blocking – is one of a number of Russian-based news websites which Forum 18 notes are blocked within Uzbekistan. Forum 18 has found that three Russian religion news sites are also blocked. Blocking is carried out by the NSS secret police. Elbek Dalimov of Uzbekistan's State Agency of Communications and Information told Forum 18 that his agency does not block websites. However Dalimov stated that access to some sites was banned in licensing agreements with internet providers. Also, Uzbek-based websites - such as those of the Full Gospel Protestant Union and detained Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov - have been forced by the authorities to close.

Uzbekistan's internet censorship was immediately evident on 9 March, when internet users in the country were blocked from viewing a Russian-language news article on Lenta.ru (reposted from the website Uznews.net) about the difficulties a Muslim in Samarkand [Samarqand] encountered in getting a passport while wearing a beard. Uznews.net itself has long been blocked in Uzbekistan. The Russian news website Ferghana.ru – which reported the blocking – is one of a number of Russian-based news websites which Forum 18 News Service notes are blocked by the Uzbek government within the country. Also blocked are three prominent Russian-based religious news websites, Portal-credo.ru, Religion.ng.ru and I-r-p.ru.

Internet users in Uzbekistan are not a large percentage of the population, although the numbers are growing. Possibly around 2 million people out of a population of over 28 million use the internet, if the official statistics are to be believed. The costs of internet access in the country mean that many users are from the more economically privileged part of the population, which is not where most targets of the state's human rights abuses - such as violations of freedom of religion or belief - are to be found.

Blocking of websites is done at the instigation of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Internet service providers blame the blocking of sites on Uzneta, owned by the state provider Uzbelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uzneta insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uzneta employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country

NSS reaction to attempts to visit banned websites can be swift. An example of this occurred in 2006 in a mahalla (district) of the capital Tashkent. A near neighbour of a source Forum 18 spoke to tried to log on at home to a political opposition website. Within fifteen minutes the NSS secret police had arrived at his home to warn him not to access such sites. Internet cafes have long displayed notices warning users not to access "religious or pornographic sites" (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941). In these cafes staff have long been under instructions to monitor sites visited by customers, and to report visits to banned sites (see F18News 22 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=36).

Sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 that the NSS secret police also uses the internet to hunt for political activists and religious believers within Uzbekistan conducting activity it does not like. Sources told Forum 18 of a case several years ago when some South Koreans working for a non-governmental organisation in Uzbekistan had posted information about their religious activity while in the country on a Korean-language website. The NSS had discovered what had been published and took action against the individuals (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941).

Extensive internet censorship

Despite relatively low numbers of internet users, Uzbekistan operates the most extensive website blocking of all the former Soviet republics. Independent news sites in Uzbek and Russian based abroad are routinely blocked, including Uznews.net, Ferghana.ru, Centrasia.ru and the Rferl.org Radio Free Europe website. Forum 18's own website Forum18.org has also been blocked, although today (16 March) one source in the country was able to view the website without problems. Many of these websites include news of violations of religious freedom in Uzbekistan as part of their coverage. Political opposition sites as well as radical Islamic sites – such as those of the Hizb ut Tahrir movement - are likewise blocked.

Asked why these websites are blocked, Elbek Dalimov, Head of the Press Service of Uzbekistan's State Agency of Communications and Information, told Forum 18 on 16 March that he is not familiar with these sites.

Dalimov went on to claim that his agency does not block any websites. Asked whether the State Agency did not implement any rules or regulations over the internet, Dalimov said that "we in licensing agreements with internet providers agree that they will not, for example, open access to pornographic or terrorist sites."

Three prominent Russian religious news websites blocked are Portal-credo.ru, which publishes its own articles and republishes many others from a wide variety of news sources; the religion supplement of Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta Religion.ng.ru, an influential fortnightly supplement with a range of news and commentary on religious issues; and the website of the Moscow-based Institute of Religion and Policy I-r-p.ru, which covers issues related to Islam and politics. The Institute is headed by Aleksandr Ignatenko, a researcher at Moscow State University and a member of the Russian President's Council for Cooperation with Religious Organisations, and has several prominent members of the Russian parliament on its board.

None of the three websites particularly focuses on religion in Uzbekistan or Central Asia, though all give the topic some coverage.

Portal-credo.ru has long been blocked in Uzbekistan (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941). Forum 18's tests in Tashkent in recent months have shown that Portal-credo.ru remained blocked on almost every occasion when it was tested, while religion.ng.ru and i-r-p.ru have been blocked every time.

Uzbek censorship does not stop at the internet. All religious literature – even works such as the Bible and the Koran – is nationwide under extremely tight censorship (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Samarkand Muslim article blocked

On 9 March, Uznews.net reported on the Russian-language part of its site the case of a 25-year-old Samarkand resident whose passport had expired. When he went to renew it he was told that in order to allow a photograph of him wearing a beard to be used in his new passport, he would require a written statement from the regional Muslim Board that he was allowed to wear a beard.

An official of the regional Muslim Board said that only the regional imam, who he said was not present at the time, could give such a statement. The official wrote down the young man's details, including his address, place of work and telephone number. The young man sought the advice of a lawyer, who said such an official demand for a statement was a violation of the Constitution. The young man's own imam at the city's Bahadur mosque told him that he himself did not have a beard, to avoid being listed by the NSS secret police as a radical. The imam declined to help the young man get a certificate, for fear of getting into trouble himself.

When the young man returned to the Muslim Board, it became clear that one of the men who had been present earlier before was the regional imam. The regional imam then printed out from the computer a pre-prepared form, and then filled it in to declare that the young man was not a religious extremist and that wearing a beard was part of the sunna (teaching and practice) of the Prophet Muhammed.

Armed with the statement, the young man returned to the passport office. Officials there expressed surprise that he had obtained the statement, which they said applicants were only rarely able to receive.

Shortly after its publication on Uznews.net, the article was reproduced on the Russian news website Lenta.ru. However, that page was then blocked. "On attempting to open this page of the website, the user is then 'thrown back' to the website's main page," Ferghana.ru noted later on 9 March. It said this was the first time in several months that Lenta.ru had been blocked.

Blocked websites on 16 March

One source in Tashkent on condition of anonymity told Forum 18 today (16 March) that the Russian-language sites Portal-credo.ru, Ferghana.ru, and Uznews.uz are blocked. Centrasia.ru and Lenta.ru are not blocked, but articles critical of Uzbekistan in these websites cannot be opened. "Five to ten minutes after a critical article on Uzbekistan is published on Centrasia.ru one cannot open the article. The website throws the browser back to the main page," the source said.

Another source in Tashkent, also on condition of anonymity, told Forum 18 on 16 March that these sites can be opened through proxy servers. But Religion.ng.ru cannot be opened in this way.

Sites within Uzbekistan closed down

Websites within Uzbekistan can be forced to close. The Justice Ministry forced the Full Gospel Protestant Union to close down its website <http://www.church.uz> in 2009 (see F18News 7 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384). It is

possible that this may be related to the site publishing a letter strongly criticising state encouragement of religious intolerance (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

A more recent closure was the website of Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov, who has been detained since January (see F18News 17 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1410). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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