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UZBEKISTAN: "8 or 9 out of every 10 confiscated religious books are Muslim"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to impose strict censorship on religious literature of all faiths sent to the country, Forum 18 News Service has found. The most recent known confiscation is of 23 books sent to a member of a Baptist church in the capital Tashkent, but Customs Inspector Dilshod Sadykov told Forum 18 that 80 to 90 per cent of all imported or posted religious literature confiscated is Muslim. The Post Office routinely opens parcels of religious books and magazines sent from abroad, sending examples to the Religious Affairs Committee who decide whether to destroy the literature or return it to the sender. "I do not understand why normal religious books need to be confiscated or destroyed", a post office employee told Forum 18 on 25 October. But, they continued, "we are small persons, and need to obey orders". Information from abroad on the internet which the authorities dislike, including Forum 18's own website, also continues to be blocked.

Uzbekistan continues to impose strict censorship on religious literature of all faiths sent to the country, Forum 18 News Service has found. The most recent known confiscation is of 23 books sent to a member of a Baptist church in the capital Tashkent, but a customs official told Forum 18 that 80 to 90 per cent of all imported or posted religious literature confiscated is Muslim. Meanwhile, the Bible Society has been allowed to receive part of one of two confiscated shipments of Bibles and related literature, but only texts in the Russian language with no texts in Uzbek. The authorities ordered the rest of the confiscated material to be sent back at the Bible Society's expense. Information from abroad on the internet which the authorities dislike, including Forum 18's own website, continues to be blocked.

All aspects of religious literature import, production and distribution are 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). The Post Office routinely opens parcels of religious books and magazines sent from abroad, sending examples to the Religious Affairs Committee who decide whether to destroy the literature or return it to the sender. Post Office and Customs officials have both denied that this is censorship (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

"8 or 9 out of every 10 confiscated religious books are Muslim"

Customs Inspector Dilshod Sadykov told Forum 18 on 27 October that "not only Christian but also all Muslim and other religious literature are confiscated" by the Customs on import into Uzbekistan. Sadykov estimated that within the last six months or year, "8 or 9 out of every 10 confiscated religious books are Muslim". When Forum 18 asked for information on the numbers of confiscated books, with their titles and authors, he said that he cannot give this information as it is "confidential".

On 23 September the Post Office Customs Division in Tashkent confiscated 23 Russian-language Christian books called 'Christ is our sanctification'. The books were sent from Kazakhstan to a member of the city's unregistered Baptist church, Baptists who wished to be unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 18 October. In defiance of international human rights commitments all unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence.

The Baptists said that on 11 October the addressee received an empty box at their local Post Office in Tashkent's Mirza-Ulugbek District, with an official statement that the 23 books were confiscated by Customs. The statement, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, was signed on 7 October by Customs Inspector Sadykov, and post office employees Barat Kholmammedov and Shoira Ilmuratova.

The statement went on to say that a sample of the books was sent to the Religious Affairs Committee, and that on 28 September the Committee stated that the import of the books was banned. The books were then sent for temporary storage at Customs until a decision on what to do with them is made.

Why are books banned?

Inspector Sadykov told Forum 18 that the reason the books were confiscated was because they were banned by the Committee, and

that he does not know what will happen to the books. Asked why such books needed to be banned or confiscated, he said that Customs does not analyse the content of religious books. "We must send all religious literature to the Religious Affairs Committee for analysis", he said. "We inspect religious literature under cameras, draw up reports, and then send samples to the Committee."

Sobitkhon Sharipov, Head of the Religious Affairs Committee's Expert Analysis Department, and other Committee officials refused to discuss censorship, banning, and confiscations with Forum 18. Each time Sharipov was called between 25 and 27 October, he stated that it was "not the right time for an interview".

"We are small persons, and need to obey orders"

"I do not understand why normal religious books need to be confiscated or destroyed", a post office employee who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 25 October. But, they continued, "we are small persons, and need to obey orders". They said that, in their experience, Customs with the Committee "in some cases will only release only Bibles and Korans". They said that all other literature is "either sent back to the sender or destroyed."

A Christian who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals suggested to Forum 18 on 25 October that there are references in the book to Christ's command to preach the Gospel to the whole world. This could lead to the book itself being seen by the authorities as missionary activity.

At least two articles of the Code of Administrative Offences have been used by the authorities to justify this kind of censorship. Article 184, Part 2 ("Illegal storage, production, import, or distribution of religious materials") bans the "illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons". This "offence" is punishable with a fine of between 50 and 150 times the minimum monthly salary, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution". Article 240 Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity") imposes punishment for this "offence" of either fines of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

"It will be hard or impossible to import Uzbek language literature"

Two large shipments of Bibles have been sent in recent years to the Bible Society, in 2008 and 2010. At a January 2011 trial in her absence, Natalya Pitirimova, the Society's Accountant, was fined for allegedly violating procedures over the import of the two shipments. The Court also ordered that the Bibles be re-exported at the Bible Societies expense (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542). A former Bible Society employee, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 October that more than 12,000 Bibles and New Testaments were shipped out of Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan, to a church close to the border in Shymkent. Around 7,000 were in the Uzbek language, and this cost the Bible Society in the region of 11,600 Uzbek Soms (35,350 Norwegian Kroner 4,600 Euros, or 6,500 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

However in early August the Religious Affairs Committee gave permission for the release to the Bible Society of 2,800 Russian Bibles from the confiscated 2010 shipment. Kholmat Ashirov, the Director of the Bible Society, told Forum 18 on 24 October that the Society "hopes that in future we can receive Uzbek language literature as well".

The former employee suggested that from their experience, "it will be very hard or even impossible to import literature in Uzbek language". Uzbek-language religious literature attracts particular hostility from the authorities (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542).

Internet censorship continues

Uzbekistan also continues to impose widespread internet censorship on sites providing information the authorities dislike (see F18News 16 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1422). Since at least mid-August access to Forum 18's own website has been blocked within the country. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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