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UZBEKISTAN: Detained for religious materials in electronic devices

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

Three Tajik transit passengers detained without charge by Uzbek border guards at the same railway station in southern Uzbekistan were freed on 4 February. The border guard who took Tojiddin Latipov off the train told him that an Islamic sermon he had on his mobile phone was in violation of Uzbekistan's Law, Latipov told Forum 18 News Service. Officials questioned him over how long he has been praying and whether he observes fasts. He was freed three days later. A mother and son were held for a month and had their computer seized after officials found a sermon on it. Makhmud (who refused to give his last name), Chief duty customs official at Boldyr station, refused to comment to Forum 18 on why Latipov and the mother and son had been held in custody for having religious materials in electronic devices. Another Tajik citizen is serving a five year sentence for a similar "offence", though his family hopes he will soon be freed under amnesty.

Three Tajik citizens transiting through Uzbekistan on their return to their homeland were taken off the train at the same Uzbek border station in two separate cases and detained without charge for having religious recordings in their electronic devices, one of the three told Forum 18 News Service. Tojiddin Latipov said he was freed on 4 February after three days, but a mother and son freed the same day had been held for a month. Uzbek railway, customs and border guard officials all refused to explain to Forum 18 why transit passengers were held simply for having religious recordings when travelling through Uzbekistan.

In the most serious such known case, another Tajik citizen, Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, was arrested in September 2013 while crossing the land border from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan. His "offence" was to have verses from the Koran and an Uzbek-language sermon on his mobile phone. The following month he was given a five year prison term for "smuggling" the Koran verses and the sermon into Uzbekistan. In a hearing presided over by Judge Bakhtiyor Miralimov, Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected Mirzorakhimov's appeal on 28 November 2013, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Officials hinted that Mirzorakhimov had been included in the December 2013 prisoner amnesty, and his family in Tajikistan still hopes he will be released (see F18News 16 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1907).

Formalising state-imposed religious censorship

The detentions come as Uzbekistan has formalised its long-standing severe state controls over all religious materials. A new Decree, entitled "Measures to improve order in the production, import and distribution of religious materials", which came into force in late January, imposed sweeping controls on the production, distribution and import of all such materials.

The Decree bans their distribution anywhere apart from in fixed commercial points of sale equipped with cash registers. Such materials, including those for personal use, cannot be imported without prior state permission. It also bans the production, storage or distribution of materials intended to encourage people to change their beliefs. It also bans works which, in the state's interpretation, "distort religious canons". The word "canons" is not defined in the Decree, but means the content of beliefs (see F18News 12 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1928).

Uzbek customs and border guards have long seized religious literature from individuals entering Uzbekistan. Individuals are often then punished for trying to bring such literature in (see F18News 30 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1843).

Religious literature is also frequently seized from people within Uzbekistan and individuals are often punished for owning such literature or for having religious texts on electronic devices. Courts frequently order confiscated religious literature – including Muslim, Christian and Jehovah's Witness literature – to be destroyed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1928).

3-day detention for sermon on mobile

Latipov, a Tajik Muslim returning from Russia on the long rail journey to Tajikistan, was taken off the train on 1 February by Uzbek border guards at Boldyr station, the first station in southern Uzbekistan after crossing from Turkmenistan. This is where Uzbek border guards and customs officials board the train to check passengers.

Lieutenant Nasriddin Bahriddinov of Uzbekistan's border guard service took Latipov off the train, telling him that an Islamic sermon he had on his mobile phone was in violation of Uzbekistan's Law, Latipov told Forum 18 on 20 March from his home town of Vahdat in Tajikistan. Despite Latipov's explanation that the sermon is "totally harmless, and that it only talks about how a Muslim should be a good person, help others," the Lieutenant told him that he "should listen to sermons in a mosque not a phone."

Lieutenant Bahriddinov then took him to the nearby Uzbek border post, Latipov told Forum 18. There he and two other officers (he did not remember the names) asked him numerous questions, including how long he had been praying Muslim prayers, whether he observes Muslim fasts, what Islamic movement he belongs to, and whether he knows any Muslim terrorists. Latipov told them that he has been "saying the Muslim prayers since childhood," that "I observe the fast," that he does "not belong to any movement," as well as does "not know any terrorists".

After three days in custody at the border post, border guards released Latipov on 4 February. They confiscated four memory sticks. Although the border guards "insisted" that he also "give away" the carburettor he had bought in Russia for his car, they "left me alone" when he categorically refused.

Latipov said that, while held in custody at the border post, he was given "a corner with a mattress on the floor" to sleep at night, he "ate together with the border guards," and that he was "not treated rudely". However, he had to pay 650 Russian Roubles (40,000 Uzbek Soms, 110 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars) to the border guards for his food for the 9 or 10 meals.

One-month detention for sermon

While Latipov was at the Boldyr border post he "heard of other Tajiks being taken off" Tajikistan-bound trains under similar excuses. "I saw a woman and her son – aged about 17 and 18 - who were kept in custody at the same post for a month," he told Forum 18. The mother and son happened to be freed on 4 February, the same day as Latipov, and were waiting for a train at Boldyr station. "She told me that border guards released them after one month in custody, but took away their laptop computer, since they found a religious sermon on it."

An Uzbekistan Railways official in Tashkent (who did not give his name) declined to comment on 20 March on the removal of transit passengers from their trains because they have religious recordings in phones or computers. He referred Forum 18 to Boldyr Station's Customs officials.

Makhmud (who refused to give his last name), Chief duty customs official at Boldyr, refused to comment the same day on why Latipov and the mother and son had been held in custody, and told Forum 18 that it should put its questions in writing. Boldyr Border Post's phone went unanswered on 20 and 24 March.

Intensified border inspections

An unnamed National Security Service (NSS) secret police officer who works at an international airport told Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service of intensified inspections of computers and mobile phones for religious materials in airports, it reported on 6 March. The NSS officer noted that "within the last two to three months several people" were given criminal punishments after being found carrying electronic versions of religious or other materials the authorities deemed illegal.

An Uzbek labour migrant working in Russia, Abdullo (last name not given), told Radio Free Europe that it took his brother several hours to go through the various inspections when he was visiting Uzbekistan in late February. Abdullo said that the authorities also examine passengers' computers to see the websites of which independent news agencies or organisations the owners have looked at, and then ask them why they did so.

"Uzbekistan's authorities have intensified inspections of individual passengers in airports and their personal computers and mobile phones," a legal expert, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 17 March. "They are mostly looking for religious materials."

The legal expert added that across Uzbekistan "in all the regions, when individuals cross from one region to another the Traffic Police inspect the identity documents, and individuals' names and personal data are recorded in special books, if they have a stamp in their passport for departure to go abroad."

When individuals return from abroad, they "are invited to the local Police Departments where they must write a statement on where exactly they visited, how long the visit was, and how much money they earned while they were abroad," the expert said. "Besides, local Mahalla [urban district] Committees collect information on residents who are absent, and refer the information to the local Police Departments. The Police then summon the relatives, and make them write statements explaining where their absent relatives

are." (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=1862.

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.

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