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UZBEKISTAN: Court orders Christian literature destroyed

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Nearly 600 Uzbek-language Christian leaflets for children were ordered destroyed by a court in Tashkent region on 12 August, the third time Baptists have had confiscated literature destroyed on court orders. Other books, including New Testaments, seized from a group of Baptists in July were ordered to be handed over to the government's Religious Affairs Committee. The four Baptists found guilty of "illegally" bringing in the books were each fined some 35 US dollars, members of Tashkent Baptist church told Forum 18 News Service. Senior religious affairs official Begzot Kadyrov claimed to Forum 18 that religious literature banned from distribution in Uzbekistan is not destroyed, but returned to the country from which it was brought, though he admitted religious literature has been destroyed. The Uzbek government censors all religious literature and other Protestants, independent Muslims, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced literature seizures and, on occasion, destruction in recent years.

Despite claims to Forum 18 News Service by senior religious affairs official Begzot Kadyrov that religious literature banned from distribution in Uzbekistan is not destroyed, a court has again ordered the destruction of confiscated Christian literature. Local Baptists fear that - as in two previous cases when Christian books were confiscated from them - the literature will be burnt. Tashkent district court in Tashkent region ruled on 12 August that the rest of the literature seized from a group of Baptists in July be handed to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, where Kadyrov works, while the Baptists were fined. The authorities routinely hunt down literature owned by members of other faiths the government does not like, including independent Muslims, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses.

"As for all believers, so for us," members of Tashkent's Council of Churches Baptist congregation declared in the wake of the court hearing, "Christian literature is of huge spiritual value. But at the moment we are practically denied the right to receive and distribute Christian literature freely." Because it is almost impossible for most religious communities to print literature within Uzbekistan because of the government's religious censorship, many import such literature from neighbouring states, including Kazakhstan.

Church members told Forum 18 that at the 12 August hearing Judge M. Alimuhamedov, at the urging of public prosecutor's assistant M Adilov, found their four fellow church members - V. Mayakov, E. Annin, O. Usmanova and I. Tsoi - guilty of importing religious literature into Uzbekistan illegally under Article 227 part 1 (breaking the customs law) of the Code of Administrative Offences. Each defendant was fined 39,175 sums (221 Norwegian kroner, 28 Euros or 35 US dollars). The court ruled that the literature - 33 copies of the New Testament, 160 copies of Mark's Gospel and 24 copies of "All children need to know this" - should be handed to the Religious Affairs Committee, while 598 copies of Uzbek-language Christian leaflets for children are to be destroyed.

The Baptists reported that the literature was seized on 20 July in the town of Keles near Tashkent, close to the border with Kazakhstan. The four church members, together with another Baptist, were interrogated for eight hours by S. Stenyagin and F. Abdullaev and other officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, "During the interrogations, photographs were taken," the Tashkent church reported back in July. "The NSS officers behaved very crudely: they used foul language, shouted, threw the Gospels onto the table disdainfully, which offended the feelings of the believers, and threatened to send the believers to prison for 10-15 days. And all this despite the fact that two of the believers were children."

"This is the fourth time that the authorities have confiscated our religious literature," church members complained to Forum 18 on 19 August. "On two occasions the confiscated literature has been burnt (we have the official documents about its destruction). It is very likely that on this occasion as well the literature will be destroyed by burning."

However, Kadyrov, a specialist on non-Islamic faiths at the religious affairs committee, told Forum 18 on 5 September that the literature had not yet reached the committee. He stressed that the Bible and the New Testament are not banned in Uzbekistan and that therefore these are "very likely" to be returned to the Baptists in the end.

"The main problem is that certain Baptists are trying to import religious literature by unlawful means," he complained to Forum 18. "According to Uzbek law, religious literature brought into the country has to undergo preliminary analysis at our committee. There is no problem with the Bible or New Testament. The Baptists should ask us 10 days before they intend to import the books and we would no doubt give them permission to go ahead with the shipment. As far as the other religious literature goes, then we do need to check it. If we judge that it contains no call to inter-ethnic or inter-faith conflict or proselytising ideas, then we will allow its import

into the country."

Kadyrov also stressed that even literature that is banned from distribution in Uzbekistan is not destroyed, but is sent back to the country from which it was brought. "It's true that there have been a few cases where religious literature has been destroyed," he admitted. "These were mistakes. We are categorically opposed to the destruction of any books."

He also recalled that in March customs officials seized Baptist literature that the authorities claimed had been imported "illegally" (see F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527), but the literature was subsequently returned to the Baptists thanks to the intervention of his committee. "On that occasion we met the Baptists half-way, even though they had broken the law," he told Forum 18. "But once again they are choosing to act illegally."

Members of other faiths frequently face literature seizures. When on 16 June, the prosecutor's office, the NSS secret police and the ordinary police searched an apartment belonging to a Hare Krishna devotee Asa Bekabayeva in Bostan, a town on the outskirts of Nukus, ninety Hare Krishna books were confiscated (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602).

Religious literature confiscated from the homes of Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses has been destroyed under court orders in recent years (see F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527).

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=546

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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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