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UZBEKISTAN: When is postal censorship not postal censorship?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan's Post Office routinely opens parcels of religious books and magazines sent from abroad, sends examples to the state Religious Affairs Committee, then collects them with a Committee decision as to whether or not to ban the title, writes to the sender and the failed recipient to explain why titles have been rejected, and (sometimes) returns them at Uzbek Post Office expense, Forum 18 News Service has found. Kural Tulebaev, Director of the main Post Office which receives foreign parcels, as well as customs officials have both denied that this is censorship. "We're just following the law," Tulebaev told Forum 18. His Customs Service colleagues were just as adamant: "The law requires that all of it is checked by the Religion Committee," a senior inspector told Forum 18, "the law is the law." The Religious Affairs Committee has refused to explain how it makes censorship decisions, or why it censors religious literature in defiance of international human rights commitments.

Uzbekistan's International Post Office in the capital, Tashkent, faces a huge task each week, opening parcels of religious books and magazines sent from abroad, sending one copy of each title to the government's Religious Affairs Committee, collecting the copies back with the Committee decision as to whether or not to ban them, writing to the sender and the failed recipient to explain why the books have been rejected, and (sometimes) returning them at Uzbek Post Office expense to the sender. But Kural Tulebaev, the Director of the International Post Office, and customs officials based there have denied that this represents censorship. "We're just following the law," Tulebaev told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 11 November.

The authorities have frequently confiscated religious literature from Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. On occasion courts have ordered that religious literature be burnt (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643). The authorities prevent literature being brought in from neighbouring Kazakhstan or from Russia and also obstruct it from being sent from abroad.

"Since the summer nothing has got through, whether in Uzbek, Karakalpak, Tatar or Russian," a Russian-based Protestant who regularly tries to send Christian literature by post to meet requests from fellow-Protestants in Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 11 November. "All this started about a month after the uprising in Andijan in May." He said in the past Russian-language Christian literature generally got through even if it did not in local languages.

Censorship of religious literature entering the country - despite Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, including in the area of freedom of speech and freedom of religion - was introduced in 1998, when the country's religion law was made much harsher. Article 19, which covers religious literature, includes this restriction: "Delivery and distribution of religious literature published abroad is done after expert analysis of its contents is carried out in the order prescribed by law." Publication of religious literature within Uzbekistan is also subject to compulsory prior censorship.

"Expert analysis" of published or imported literature is conducted by the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Forum 18 has been unable to find out on what basis the Committee permits or rejects individual books. Reached on 14 November, officials in the Expertise Department refused to explain to Forum 18 how the Department operated, the reasons for refusing specific literature and even the name of the head of the Department. Officials also declined to explain why Uzbekistan censors religious literature in defiance of its international commitments.

Forum 18 has received numerous copies of rejection letters in Russian from the International Post Office, signed by Tulebaev or his first deputy Saidavali Ahrorhojaev and sent to the original senders in Russia and Kazakhstan. Some of the letters are also signed by the head of the PI-1 Section, E. Basheva, and one or other "Engineer of the Quality Service". Some are on headed paper with a reference number, others are computer-generated letters on a blank piece of paper. All the letters Forum 18 has seen – which vary slightly but are of similar content - date from between May and late October.

One such "Document on Discovery and Confiscation", dated in late October and sent to the original sender in Kazakhstan, declares in full: "This document has been drawn up to record that at the PI-1 Section of the International Post Office literature of religious content was discovered during the conducting of a customs examination in plain wrappers which had arrived from the town of [...] in Kazakhstan which, in accordance with Article 19 of the Law on [Freedom of] Conscience and Religious Organisations, was handed on for an expert analysis. According to the conclusion of the Religious Affairs Committee under the Cabinet of Ministers of the

Republic of Uzbekistan, the import of the magazine "[..]" into the territory of Uzbekistan is forbidden. On the basis of this the magazine is being sent back." (Forum 18 has removed the identifying information to protect the sender.)

When the banned religious literature consists of books, the Document on Discovery and Confiscation itemises the title and the number of copies of each book sent.

In one July letter to an individual who had sent several named Christian books from Russia, Tulebaev reminded the sender that the Religious Affairs Committee had banned those books and the individual had already been warned twice before not to send them to recipients in Uzbekistan. "Despite this, they still continue to arrive from your organisation addressed to the Republic of Uzbekistan," Tulebaev wrote. "We ask you not to send by post the above-named titles addressed to the Republic of Uzbekistan, otherwise all post will be returned to the sender."

Books denied entry include My Large Bible, an illustrated children's book. In one case, a parcel which contained only two copies of an Uzbek-language Protestant book, The Power of a Praying Wife, was returned.

One Protestant who had sent a parcel of Christian books from Germany to Protestants in Uzbekistan received them back in summer 2005 with an official letter from the Uzbek Post Office declaring that sending such religious literature into Uzbekistan is not permitted. The letter particularly instructed the sender not to try to mail further copies of a book by Uzbek Protestant pastor Shirinai Dosova. She is now based in Moscow and was strip-searched at Tashkent airport in April 2005, on a return visit to her homeland (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665).

Devara Yuldasheva, the head of the Customs Service at the International Post Office was out of the office on 11 November. But a Senior Inspector, Ibrahim (he did not give his last name), shrugged off suggestions that the Uzbek government did not want religious literature to arrive from abroad. "There is nothing bad in religious literature," he told Forum 18 on 11 November, "but the law requires that all of it is checked by the Religion Committee. The law is the law."

He and his colleagues explained to Forum 18 that all parcels arriving at the Post Office from abroad (all foreign parcels arrive in Uzbekistan via the International Post Office) are x-rayed by customs. If they contain any religious books, customs officials inform postal workers, who open the parcels. Customs officials say that it is only rarely that religious books arrive by post.

Tulebaev of the Post Office insists that only religious literature that is "against state structures" is returned. "If there is nothing special in it, it is allowed through," he claimed.

He said that a van takes one copy of each religious publication to the Religious Affairs Committee in central Tashkent. "If there is only one book, maybe we wait for more to come in and send them over together," he explained. "We send books over sometimes once a week, sometimes maybe three times a week." He said postal workers then telephone the Religious Affairs Committee a day or so later, to ask if the literature is ready for collection with the decision as to whether the books are permitted or banned, before sending the van to retrieve them.

Tulebaev said he had no statistics on how much religious literature arrived from abroad by post and how much of that was banned from entry. "But it is very rare for literature to be returned," he insisted to Forum 18. "Maybe 96 per cent or more gets through – only about 3 per cent is returned." He said that when the Religious Affairs Committee bans a book it is sent back to the original sender at the expense of the Uzbek Postal Service and the intended recipient in Uzbekistan is also given a copy of the letter outlining the ban.

Others are highly sceptical of Tulebaev's claims. One Russian-based Protestant, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that no book parcels he has sent to Christians in Uzbekistan in recent months have got through. He also complained that although some literature is returned to the sender, the rest simply disappears.

Religious literature is also routinely confiscated by customs officers on Uzbekistan's land borders. In August, in the latest of a string of such cases, a court in Tashkent region ordered the destruction of Christian leaflets imported into Uzbekistan by a group of Baptists, while other books they had imported were handed to the religious affairs committee. The Baptists, who denied they had done anything illegal, were fined under Article 227 part 1 (breaking the Customs Law) of the Code of Administrative Offences (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643).

Literature found by police and secret police officers in raids on private homes – whether Muslim, Christian, Hare Krishna or Jehovah's Witness – is routinely confiscated and often destroyed (see F18News 12 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=604).

Jehovah's Witnesses are among those complaining of frequent literature seizures. "Our literature is regarded as banned – even if it has been imported legally – in places outside Chirchik [Chirchiq] and Fergana [Farghona], the only two towns where we are allowed to have registered communities," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 14 November. "So outside these towns it can just be confiscated."

A 26 May 2005 decision by Urgench [Urganch] City Court punishing Jehovah's Witness Ruslanbek Ismailov for holding religious meetings in his home noted that "the brochure 'What Does God Require of Us?' is of a missionary nature and on the basis of the conclusion of the expert group of the Religious Affairs Committee it is banned to import this into the Republic of Uzbekistan and use it". The decision noted that other religious literature confiscated from him – including Bibles – was only for "internal use" by registered Jehovah's Witness congregations and, as the Jehovah's Witnesses are unregistered in Urgench, its use was therefore illegal. Missionary activity by any religious community is – against international human rights standards - forbidden in Uzbekistan.

The Religious Affairs Committee does permit limited quantities of religious literature to be printed or imported by religious communities which have a registered centralised organisation. However, such permissions are very difficult to obtain and are inadequate for the needs of even registered religious communities. Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence, against international human rights standards. (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=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 2005 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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY