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UZBEKISTAN: Court fines Baptists and burns Bibles

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following a raid on a Baptist church in the southern Uzbek town of Karshi, two visiting Baptists were on 25 October given massive fines of over 45 times the country's minimum monthly salary each for participating in unregistered religious worship, while four local church members were given smaller fines, Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service. The court ordered Bibles and hymnbooks confiscated during the raid to be burnt, a regular official practice. The judge refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. After 30 police officers raided a Pentecostal church in the capital Tashkent on 13 November, one church member has so far been fined. A senior policeman told church members complaining that he was smoking in the church "It may be a church to you, but to me it's nothing. I'll smoke where I like." The Karshi Baptists called for Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law to be brought into line with the religious freedom guarantees in the country's Constitution and international human rights standards.

Six Baptists were given massive fines on 25 October in the town of Karshi [Qarshi] in Surkhandarya region of southern Uzbekistan for participating in an unregistered religious community, a Protestant who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Two of the six – both visitors to the Karshi congregation from Tashkent and Fergana – were each fined 540,000 Sums (2,762 Norwegian Kroner, 334 Euros or 438 US Dollars), with the other four receiving smaller fines. Uzbekistan's harsh religion law – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – bans all unregistered religious activity and prescribes heavy penalties for those found guilty.

Christian literature seized during a 27 August raid on the church – one Bible, 21 copies of the "Wisdom of Solomon" (the Old Testament Book of Proverbs in Uzbek), one copy of the "Song of resurrection", eight copies of the hymnbook "Jesus' youth" (published by the Baptists' Christian publishing house), and seven copies of the Baptist magazine "Herald of Truth" – was burnt on court orders.

Judge Alisher Jalilov of the town's criminal court fined the Baptists under Article 240 of Uzbekistan's Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "breaking the law on religious organisations". Those fined are members of the Council of Churches Baptists, who reject registration in all the former Soviet republics where they operate as they believe it leads to unwarranted state interference in their communities' internal religious life.

Receiving the top fines of 540,000 Sums were Vladimir Nochevkin from Tashkent and Aleksei Berlyaev from Fergana. Also fined were four local church members: Sergei Shishov (324,000 Sums), Svetlana Andreychenko who owns the home where the church meets (270,000 Sums), Irina Sultonova (108,000 Sums) and Nadezhda Bondarenko (108,000 sums). Such fines represent huge sums in Uzbekistan, where the minimum monthly wage is less than 12,000 Sums, and the average monthly wage in Karshi is less than 60,000 sums. Usually, courts only rarely sentence believers to fines of more than 120,000 Sums for operating without registration. However, even two years ago believers in Karshi are on record as having been fined more than 240,000 Sums.

On 17 November Forum 18 reached Judge Jalilov in Karshi to find out why he had imposed such harsh penalties on religious believers peacefully exercising their constitutional rights, but he categorically refused to discuss the case by telephone.

No-one from the government's Religious Affairs Committee would speak to Forum 18. Aziz Obidov, the former press officer for the Committee, has now joined the Foreign Ministry and other officials at the Committee followed orders and refused to speak to Forum 18.

However, in earlier conversations with Forum 18, Religious Affairs Committee officials stressed several times that the Bible is permissible literature in Uzbekistan and that no books may be burnt under Uzbek law. "The Bible is legally permitted literature and may be distributed freely throughout Uzbekistan," Begzot Kadyrov, senior specialist at the Committee, told Forum 18 several months ago. "As far as other imported literature is concerned, the relevant church must receive our Committee's permission to import it. However, even unlawfully imported literature that arrives in Uzbekistan is not burnt, but is sent back to the country from which it came."

But despite these claims, it is common practice for the Uzbek authorities to burn literature, including Bibles, that has been confiscated from members of unregistered religious communities (see F18News 6 September 2005)

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643). This year government censorship of religious literature has been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805), while massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity were introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720).

The prosecution of the six Baptists followed a raid on the church by local police on Sunday 27 August while the congregation was hosting a visit by fellow-Baptists from the capital Tashkent and Fergana [Farghona], Baptist sources told Forum 18. The six were taken to the police station to be interrogated. There they were pressured to apply for registration for the congregation - even though two of the six were visitors, not congregation members - and pressured to write statements. All six refused to write statements for the police. The police filmed the interrogation against the wishes of the Baptists. The six were not freed until late in the evening.

The Baptists called for the revocation of the punishments against the six, as well as calling for Uzbekistan's harsh religion law to be brought into line with the religious freedom guarantees in the country's Constitution and international human rights standards.

The persecution of religious minorities also continues in other areas of Uzbekistan. On 18 November the Criminal Court for Chilanazar district of the capital Tashkent found Pentecostal Christian Risto Dyachkov guilty under Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences. He was fined 60,000 Sums.

The prosecution followed a 13 November raid on his Pentecostal church by thirty local police officers, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Aleksandr Shishkov. One Protestant complained to Forum 18 that police "illegally" confiscated 133 videotapes, 379 audiotapes, a DVD and CDs, as well as 30 Christian books, including copies of the Bible and New Testament. Several young people were forced "under threat of violence" to go to the police station to write statements. The church's pastor, Serik Kadyrov, was also threatened with prosecution. When church members complained to Shishkov that he was smoking inside the church, he responded: "It may be a church to you, but to me it's nothing. I'll smoke where I like."

Meanwhile, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 that on 3 November, the Justice Department for Tashkent region has issued an official warning to Full Gospel Church pastor Vyacheslav Bely, who leads a Full Gospel Pentecostal congregation in Yangiyul near Tashkent. Officials claim that the church needs to re-register its statute within a month, otherwise registration will be stripped from the congregation. Sources point out to Forum 18 that such speedy re-registration is all but impossible and term the demand "illegal". Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law, if the congregation is stripped of registration any activity it then undertakes will be punishable.

Despite these and other recent government attacks on religious communities – including Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and others - the Uzbek authorities have recently been trying to defend their record, claiming to uphold religious freedom (see F18News 28 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=878). (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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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