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UZBEKISTAN: Prime-time state TV incites intolerance of religious minorities and religious freedom

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

Protestants across Uzbekistan have expressed great concern to Forum 18 News Service about two prime-time national TV attacks on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. "Almost the whole country watched it," one Protestant – who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals for talking publicly about religious persecution – told Forum 18. "We were accused of everything, including turning people into zombies and driving them to psychiatric hospitals. Everyone points at us on the streets." The programme openly encouraged religious intolerance and attacks on religious freedom. Although they "had no impact on people without television or who have satellite TV or Russian channels," one Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18. "But everyone else with only Uzbek channels who saw it was talking about it. This has led to an increase of intolerance." The Protestant believes the programmes were screened to prepare public opinion for another clampdown on religious freedom.

Protestants in several regions of Uzbekistan have expressed great concern to Forum 18 News Service over a prime-time national television attack on Protestant churches, screened in two parts two nights running, and its impact on them. "The programme was very insulting. Almost the whole country watched it," one Protestant – who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals for talking publicly about religious persecution – told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent. "We were accused of everything, including turning people into zombies and driving them to psychiatric hospitals. Everyone points at us on the streets." Also accused in the programme were Jehovah's Witnesses.

Another Tashkent-based Protestant – who likewise requested anonymity for fear of reprisals – told Forum 18 that one Protestant shown in the programme has since faced severe problems at work. "They wanted to dismiss him as a 'sectarian'." The Protestant also reported that in a town away from the capital – preferring not to name the town for fear the church will suffer – one registered Protestant church which had previously enjoyed good relations with people in the neighbourhood had been subjected to abuse and condemnation by local people since the broadcast. "The programme has damaged good relations between faiths."

The broadcasts came as the authorities in the Andijan [Andijon] region instituted a new ban on the Muslim call to prayer from mosques, as another court ordered confiscated Christian literature to be burned and as the government's Religious Affairs Committee banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from importing Bibles (see F18News 20 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=892). The broadcast was also part of a government campaign to justify its restrictions on religious freedom, while claiming to respect religious tolerance and religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=891).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Uigur Gapurov, the only official of the Religious Affairs Committee said to be still at the office in Tashkent, to find out why the government is restricting religious freedom even further and why the state-controlled media broadcasts programmes inciting hostility towards religious minorities. The woman who answered the phone at the Committee on 19 December told Forum 18 that all other officials had already left for Saudi Arabia for the haj pilgrimage (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884). However, another employee later told Forum 18 the Committee has no employee named Gapurov and said no other officials were present.

The previously unscheduled two-part programme, entitled "Hypocrisy", was broadcast on national state television's first channel in Uzbek on the evenings of 30 November and 1 December, with each programme lasting some 30 minutes.

"Although our people have left behind the afflictions of the Soviet system, the dangers and attacks - which are directed against our historical memory and national feelings and which aim to turn people into zombies that are alien to our people's spirituality and national identity - have not yet ended," the announcer began the programme. "On the contrary, even more dangerous afflictions are emerging. For instance, the fact that certain missionary communities are trying to achieve their hypocritical goals by taking advantage of the religious freedoms guaranteed in our multi-faith society raises serious concerns."

Jewish and Russian Orthodox representatives spoke of what they claimed was the country's religious freedom, then Zulhaydar Sultonov, chair of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, and Begzot Kadyrov, a specialist at the Committee, attacked

missionary activity. The presenter alleged that Protestants use bribes to attract converts and described them as "swindlers". "On the pretext of financially helping people in need, they instil their own teachings in these people's minds. As it turns out, soon the targeted people become complete zombies." The programme described the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church – which the government recognises as a registered religious organisation – as "illegally operating".

Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee stated that "Turning away from the religion of one's ancestors is not only one's own mistake but this conditions also lead to certain conflicts and very bad situations between brothers, sisters and between parents and their children."

"Freedom of faith has been fully provided in our sacred homeland of Uzbekistan," stated Sergey Statsenko, a deacon of the Russian Orthodox Church, who claimed that "this is especially clearly reflected in the conditions provided for our fellow followers, that is, the Christians." He went on to state that "the spreading of sects can be compared to cancer. Members of such a system, whose mind has been poisoned by false religious ideas, try to lead other people to this wrong path."

Financial inducements were claimed to be one practice of missionaries. Against a video backdrop of chanting and clapping worshippers, the presenter stated that "those who use religion to achieve various goals firstly make good use of one's economic situation. On the pretext of financially helping people in need," the presented stated, "they instil their own teachings in these people's minds. As it turns out, soon the targeted people become complete zombies," he said.

To a background of pictures of two apparent drug addicts, the presenter also alleged that Protestants turn their adherents into drug addicts. Feruza Alimova, captioned as a psychologist, said that drugs are "certainly a universal way to capture young people with a weak will and character" and alleged that missionaries use hypnosis to attract new members to their "sects".

The presenter complained that some Protestant churches hold services in Uzbek – although this is the state language - and that they use songs and dance in worship. "A Khorezm [a region of north-west Uzbekistan] song and dance at a Christian house of worship? Honestly, we weren't expecting this," he said.

Uzbek-language services are, the presenter stated, "undoubtedly evidence of a serious intent to convert local people to Christianity. As you can see, the people who turned away from their forefathers' religion of Islam and chose Christianity are coming to the house of worship and congratulating each other over their holidays. These are the fruits of the fact that religious missionary work is well underway," he said.

The second programme focused on the Full Gospel Church in Tashkent, stating that the church operated "illegally," which the church denies. One church leader had been "brought to account," the programme claimed, for his "illegal" religious activity in 2005. The presenter complained that foreigners were visiting Protestant churches to preach, adding that law-enforcement officials at airports watch for foreigners arriving to conduct "illegal missionary activity". He said one Korean charity worker was recently deported for such missionary activity.

Deportation is a weapon that has been recently used more frequently against religious believers (see eg. F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838) and religious-based charitable and humanitarian activities have been under attack in Uzbekistan (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852).

Worship involving singing in Protestant churches was particularly targeted by the programme. Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee stated that a mosque was usually quiet. But in Protestant churches, Kadyrov claimed, "songs and music are the main means of worship. Of course, young people would prefer the latter and they more quickly absorb this false idea."

He also stated that, under Uzbek law [against international human rights standards], propagating religion in public or in private homes is illegal. "Some Christian Protestant organisations either do not want to know this or intentionally try to violate it. And they still distribute literature in the streets or stop people and propagate their religion by other means."

Kadyrov claimed that religious organisations "do not care about how the lives of people, whom they have subjugated by leading them astray, will be and what will happen to them. They only [think of] increasing the number of followers and getting more money," he claimed.

Ilhomjon Bekmirzayev, an alleged "researcher," was quoted as saying that the US Peace Corps funded missionary activities through student scholarships and providing humanitarian aid.

Also attacked in the programme were a Protestant church in Angren in Tashkent region and a Korean-founded Christian church in Tashkent's Mirobod district. Also attacked were Jehovah's Witnesses for holding a meeting in a private home in Khorezm region, as the presenter likened the group to the murderous Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo.

The goal of missionary activities, Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed, was "to instil dogmatic ideas, which are distant from pure religious doctrines, to people's minds and, through this, to turn them to spiritually poor zombies." The

programme's presenter claimed that "failure to more clearly explain Islam to people is leading to widespread missionary activities." Kadyrov agreed with this, claiming of one convert to Christianity that "family, neighbourhood and society have lost that young person," that "we failed to teach Islam's advantages" and that it was "better to prevent than to cure religious conversion."

The programme concluded with the presenter claiming that "what if today's missionaries achieve their goals and our people divide into groups in regard with their faith? Who can guarantee that one day the Uzbeks with different faiths will not start to fight against each other? No one. In fact, this is the main goal of missionaries, and the worst consequence they want for us," the presenter said.

"The programme had no impact on people without television or who have satellite TV or Russian channels," one Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18. "But everyone else with only Uzbek channels who saw it was talking about it. This has led to an increase of intolerance." The Protestant believes the programme was designed to prepare public opinion for a further clampdown and to warn people not to attend Protestant churches.

Television and media attacks on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses occur intermittently (see eg. F18News 28 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=878), but television attacks have previously generally been confined to local television channels (see eg. F18News 16 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=653).

However, in what has become a routine practice in the Uzbek media, the "Hypocrisy" broadcast repeatedly referred to religious freedom and religious extremism and violence together. This is an apparent attempt to establish in viewers' minds the idea that religion is a dangerous force, which the government is right to control and restrict. (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>.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY