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UZBEKISTAN: "It's not confiscation, it's temporary removal"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has confiscated Christian books from a youth group returning from Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. An Uzbek customs official claimed to Forum 18 that the confiscations were "not confiscation. It's temporary removal". Customs officials claimed that a court would decide what would happen to the literature. Baptists complained that a customs official swore at them, saying: "We are the bosses here and we will do what we like. If we need to, we'll lock you away." Officials refused to provide copies of Confiscation Certificates and the group was released after being held for nine hours. Also, the head of Ukraine's Baptist Union has been denied entry to Uzbekistan and a Protestant has been denied permission to leave, no reasons for either action being given. And two more foreign religious websites have had access from within Uzbekistan blocked. These actions appear to be part of a policy of isolating religious believers from their fellow-believers in other countries.

Uzbekistan has confiscated Christian books from a youth group returning from visiting neighbouring Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The head of Ukraine's Baptist Union has been denied entry to Uzbekistan, and two more foreign religious websites have had access from within Uzbekistan blocked.

Police continue to raid worship services and punish those taking part. Three registered Protestant churches in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] have in October faced such raids and court-imposed punishments (see F18News 26 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1514).

The confiscation of Christian books is, an Uzbek customs official has claimed, "not confiscation" as he put it to Forum 18 on 25 November. "It's temporary removal", he insisted, declining to say whether every border post will confiscate every religious book from travellers crossing the border. The Tashkent Region Customs official claimed that the "temporary removal" of religious literature is necessary to allow it to be "checked", but refused to say why this is necessary. "We have a Religious Affairs Committee. They do this", was all he would say.

As is their usual practice, officials of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs declined to discuss any of these issues. "We only answer questions in writing," Committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 on 25 November and put the phone down.

"We are the bosses here and we will do what we like"

On 9 November, a group of 23 young Baptists and their leaders from churches in Tashkent, Fergana [Farghona] and Samarkand [Samarqand] were stopped by Uzbek border guards at the Navoi/Kaplombek crossing point in Tashkent Region. They were returning to Uzbekistan from a visit to a church meeting in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

"Although each person had just one copy of any book or magazine, which was their personal property and had their name in, these were confiscated as being illegally imported," local Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 12 November. "After an initial check, their Bibles were returned, but everything else was confiscated." Books confiscated included children's hymn books and books of Christian poetry.

One girl had a personal notebook with names and telephone numbers, as well as a disc with photographs confiscated.

The Head of the Customs shift, Captain Bahodir Saidhojaev, and customs officer Z. Rajabov told them that the literature was being sent for an "expert analysis". This analysis, they said, would be handed to a court which would decide the fate of the confiscated literature.

The Baptists complained that Rajabov swore at them and told them: "We are the bosses here and we will do what we like. If we need to, we'll lock you away."

"Although our friends insisted to the officers that they should give them a copy of the Confiscation Certificate, the officers refused to do so," church members added. The Baptists were allowed to go in the early evening after being held for nine hours.

The Baptists appealed for support so that their literature would be returned, that "further persecution would stop" and that they would be able to freely acquire, read and distribute Christian literature. They point out that the confiscations violate Article 29 of Uzbekistan's Constitution - which guarantees the right to "freedom of thought, speech and convictions", including the right to "search for, receive and distribute any information" unless it is forbidden by law - and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

The Tashkent Region customs official refused to give Forum 18 the telephone number of the Navoi/Kaplombek crossing point, claiming first that it has no telephone, then insisting that it "does not work".

No explanation for Ukrainian Baptist's entry denial

The head of Ukraine's Baptist Union, Vyacheslav Nesteruk, was denied entry to Uzbekistan at the capital Tashkent's airport on 31 October and put on a return flight to his homeland, as he told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev on 22 November. Pastor Nesteruk had been invited by Uzbekistan's Baptist Union to take part in the celebrations of the 110th anniversary of the founding of Tashkent's Baptist church. As a Ukrainian citizen, he did not need a visa to enter Uzbekistan. He had been due to return to Ukraine on 2 November.

Deportation of or denial of entry to foreign citizens known to be involved in religious activity is part of Uzbekistan's apparent policy of isolating as far as possible local religious communities from their fellow-believers abroad (see F18News 6 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1264).

Pastor Nesteruk said when he presented his passport on arrival at Tashkent airport, "the officers spoke among themselves" before summoning him to a separate room. "It was Sunday morning, and I told them church members were waiting to take me direct to the church for the festive service at 10 am," he told Forum 18. However, he said the passport officers would give him no explanation for refusing him entry. They insisted he was put on the return flight to Kiev several hours later and while he was waiting held him in a room with two other men.

Nesteruk said officers gave his passport to the Ukrainian aircrew when they put him on the plane, and he did not get it back until it was handed to him by the Ukrainian Migration Service in Kiev. The Uzbek authorities had not stamped his passport. "They didn't say if I have been banned from visiting in future," Pastor Nesteruk told Forum 18.

The Tashkent church service with around 600 people went ahead without Pastor Nesteruk.

After his return, Pastor Nesteruk asked the Uzbek Embassy in Kiev why he had been denied entry, but it responded that he should send an official request to the Foreign Ministry in Tashkent. He told Forum 18 that the Institute for Religious Freedom in Kiev wrote on his behalf to the Uzbek Foreign Ministry, but has had no response.

Asked about the entry denial, the Foreign Ministry referred Forum 18 to spokesperson Ishnor Jabarov. However, he was not available on 25 November and his colleagues said they could not immediately find out why Pastor Nesteruk was denied entry.

Uzbekistan often denies entry to religious believers it thinks will take part in religious activities. Reasons for entry denials are rarely given (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409).

Exit denial

For Uzbek passports to be valid for international travel, citizens must obtain exit permission valid for two years (see F18News 6 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1264). This has been denied to those the authorities dislike, such as an October denial to a delegate from Uzbekistan to a large Protestant conference in South Africa, the 'Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization'. Forum 18 was told that the would-be delegate did not already have the two-year exit permission, and was unable to obtain it.

Such denials have sometimes been overturned after protests. Natalya Kadyrova, wife of a Protestant pastor in Tashkent, received an exit visa in April 2009 after months of exit denials (see F18News 8 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1307).

Uzbekistan also deports legally-resident foreigners it suspects of conducting religious activity. Two South Korean Protestants were deported after allegations were made against them this year (see F18News 23 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1491). In late 2009 a Baha'i and a Protestant were similarly deported (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409).

More website censorship

In early October the Uzbek authorities blocked access within the country to the news part of a Ukrainian Russian-language Christian website news.invictory.org, Tashkent residents told Forum 18. The non-news part of the site remains accessible. The site regularly publishes articles detailing harassment of Christian communities in Uzbekistan, including material from Forum 18's reports.

An American-based Russian-language site run by a Protestant from Belarus, Vlad Kusakin, has also been blocked. Among the subjects on this site is denial of religious freedom experienced by Christians in Uzbekistan and neighbouring countries.

No-one at the State Agency of Communications and Information in Tashkent would explain to Forum 18 on 25 November why these websites have been blocked in Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek authorities have long blocked access to three prominent Russian-based religious news websites, Portal-credo.ru, Religion.ng.ru and I-r-p.ru, as well as to a range of general news and opposition websites based abroad. Also, Uzbek-based religious websites - such as those of the Full Gospel Protestant Union and detained Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov - have been forced by the authorities to close (see F18News 16 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1422). (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=1170.

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.

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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