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UZBEKISTAN: "No need to import Bibles"?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

At a January hearing in her absence, Natalya Pitirimova, Accountant of the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, was fined for violating procedures over the import of two shipments of Bibles and Children's Bibles in 2008 and 2010. The state Religious Affairs Committee, which operates Uzbekistan's strict prior compulsory censorship of all religious literature, has refused to release the Bibles, despite successive appeals from Christian churches. Judge Dilshod Suleymanov also ordered that the Bible Society return the shipments - totalling nearly 15,000 copies - to Russia at its own cost. The judge claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the "Bible Society did not present requests on time to the Religious Affairs Committee from churches in Uzbekistan that they need the literature, and subsequently as time passed this violated customs procedures." Justice Ministry officials told the Bible Society "there is no need to import Bibles into Uzbekistan since there's an electronic version on the internet."

Uzbekistan's authorities continue to impose heavy censorship of religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two shipments of Bibles and Children's Bibles totalling nearly 15,000 copies - seized by Tashkent City Customs on the instruction of Uzbekistan's Justice Ministry and state Religious Affairs Committee in 2008 and 2010 - are still under confiscation. Officials have given various reasons for refusing to release the literature, but particularly objected to Bibles in Uzbek and Karakalpak, a language spoken in north-western Uzbekistan. The authorities are stepping up pressure on the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, to whom the literature was sent, to return the shipments to the sender at its own cost.

A Tashkent City Court on 12 January fined Natalya Pitirimova, the Bible Society's Accountant, in a hearing in her absence, and obliged the Bible Society to re-export the literature, Pitirimova complained to Forum 18.

Members of the Bible Society also complained to Forum 18 that Justice Ministry officials summoned Oleg Muhamedjanov, the Bible Society's then President, and Aleksey Voskresensky, its new Director, in December 2010. Over a four-hour period, officials at first questioned the two separately, and then together.

Officials stated that "there is no need to import Bibles into Uzbekistan since there's an electronic version on the internet." (They did not explain why it was not wrong to read the Bible on the internet but wrong to acquire a printed copy.) The officials also gave the Bible Society other warnings, Forum 18 was told, leading some to fear that the government is seeking to close down the organisation altogether (see F18News 28 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1547).

Internet censorship, carried out by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, is widespread (see F18News 16 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1422).

"I will not answer any questions"

The Religious Affairs Committee and Justice Ministry officials refused to discuss the issues with Forum 18. Asked why the Religious Affairs Committee does not allow 15,000 Bibles, the text of which it has already approved, to enter the country, and why the Uzbek authorities put pressure on the Bible Society, its Leading Specialist Begzot Kadyrov retorted to Forum 18 on 15 February: "I will not answer any questions. Hundreds of times I have told you to send your questions to the Foreign Ministry." He then hung up the phone.

Each time from 11 February Forum 18 tried to reach Akborhon Nabirayev, Head of the Justice Ministry's Department responsible for religious organisations, officials took Forum 18's name, and kept saying that he was busy and asking to call back. Finally, on 17 February an official said that Nabirayev could not come to the phone, and asked what the question was. Asked why the Bible Society was pressured and why 15,000 Bibles were confiscated by the authorities, the official put the phone down.

Tight religious literature censorship

Religious literature in Uzbekistan is under tight state control. The import and production of literature – including the Koran and the Bible - is strictly controlled, with compulsory prior censorship by the state Religious Affairs Committee. Only registered communities can ask for permission to print or import material. Relatively little literature about the majority Islamic faith is allowed

to be published, and none is imported officially (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Religious literature is often confiscated during police and NSS secret police raids. Courts then often order that such religious literature – including copies of the Bible – be destroyed, as was ordered by Fergana [Farghona] Criminal Court in October 2010 to literature confiscated from three Protestants, who were also fined (see F18News 26 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1514).

Tashkent Court fines Accountant and obliges Bible Society to re-export Bibles

Pitirimova, the Bible Society's Accountant, was tried on 12 January at Tashkent's Chilanzar District Criminal Court, in a hearing chaired by Judge Dilshod Suleymanov, under Article 227-13 of the Code of Administrative Offences (violation of the procedure for placing goods in storage, storing or conducting operations with them). According to the decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, responsibility was put on the Bible Society "to return the confiscated two shipments of literature (..) to the sender in the Russian Federation." Pitirimova was fined 316,505 Soms (1,082 Norwegian Kroner, 140 Euros or 189 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

As seen from the Chilanzar Court decision, the first shipment of books to the Bible Society arrived at Tashkent City Customs on 18 May 2008 from the Russian Federation in eleven parcels. The court decision does not indicate the number of books but Pitirimova told Forum 18 that there are 12,000 books in the shipment – roughly 5,000 Russian Bibles as well as roughly 7,000 books – mostly Children's Bibles – in Uzbek and Karakalpak languages (the figures on the literature in Uzbek and Karakalpak were confirmed by the Religious Affairs Committee).

The second shipment from the Russian Bible Society arrived on 15 January 2010. The court decision indicates that 2,990 books in three pallets were sent from the Russian Federation to the Bible Society. Pitirimova said that the second shipment consisted entirely of Bibles in Russian.

Court hears case in Bible Society's absence

The court heard the case in the absence of the Bible Society's Director and Accountant Pitirimova, claiming – as seen in the decision – that "although Pitirimova was informed of the time of hearing she did not appear before the court without giving the reasons for failure to appear, and therefore the Court deems it possible to conduct the hearing in her absence."

Pitirimova rejects this, insisting that Judge Suleymanov made only one phone call to summon her on 12 January, the day of the hearing. "I told him that at that time the Director of the Bible Society was out of town and I could not appear before the Court as I do not hold a leading position," she told Forum 18 on 14 February. "I asked the Judge to postpone the hearing for a couple of days until our Director returns, but he would not listen to me. He said he would go ahead and hear the case in our absence."

Judge Suleymanov would not comment to Forum 18 as to why he only summoned Pitirimova for the hearing by telephone on the day of the hearing and not in writing.

Bible Society lodges appeal

Pitirimova complained to Forum 18 that the District Court violated several points. It did not send the Bible Society a written summons to the hearing, in its decision it speaks of the Bible shipments as "confiscated" literature, whereas no literature was confiscated from Pitirimova or the Bible Society, and the court decision is not clear about how exactly Pitirimova allegedly violated procedures, she pointed out to Forum 18.

She said that the Bible Society lodged an appeal against the Chilanzar District Court decision on 3 February to Tashkent City Criminal Court. However, the Court has not responded yet to the appeal. She has not yet paid the fine.

Judge defends religious censorship

Judge Suleymanov argued to Forum 18 on 15 February that the "Bible Society did not present requests on time to the Religious Affairs Committee from churches in Uzbekistan that they need the literature, and subsequently as time passed this violated customs procedures."

Accountant Pitirimova rejected this, pointing out that neither the Religion Law nor the Bible Society's charter obliges it to collect requests from churches to import literature. However, she pointed out that in September 2010 the Bible Society sent a letter signed by Pastors of 38 churches to the Religious Affairs Committee requesting the literature "so that the authorities would have no excuses" not to release the literature.

However, Pitirimova said, the Religious Affairs Committee was not satisfied and demanded that the Bible Society collect individual requests from Churches. "Churches are closely monitored by the local authorities, and they are afraid to give details of how many

new members they have, and how many more Bibles they need," she lamented. "It took quite some time to receive requests from 26 churches, and we sent those a few days ago to the Committee." Pitirimova said that the Bible Society received notification on 15 February that the requests reached the State Committee.

Asked why the Court fined Pitirimova and obliged the Bible Society to re-export the literature while the literature was not confiscated from her or her organisation, Judge Suleymanov merely pointed out that Pitirimova has already appealed against his decision.

Asked why the officially registered Bible Society cannot receive and have in store Bibles for future use in Uzbekistan, and why residents of Uzbekistan who are not members of any Church or are not Christians should not have the chance to obtain Bibles from the Bible Society, the Judge told Forum 18 on 15 February without further explanation: "There is an official Directive that religious literature must be imported based on the requests from religious organisations." Pitirimova said that she was not aware of any such Directive.

Judge Suleymanov declined to comment on why residents of Uzbekistan should have to ask for special permission from the State to obtain and read religious literature in their native languages. "This is the first time I have come across such a case, and I cannot comment over the phone." He asked Forum 18 to send further questions to the Supreme Court.

"Plot to flood Uzbekistan with illegal literature"?

About three weeks after the first shipment of Bibles arrived at Tashkent City Customs in May 2008, the state Religious Affairs Committee published an article on its official website on 6 June 2008 entitled "Plots failed".

The article alleged that "with concerted efforts of the Religious Affairs Committee and Customs and Justice authorities the attempt of the Bible Society of Uzbekistan to transport into Uzbekistan illegal religious literature was prevented." It said the shipment was "masterfully disguised under the Russian language literature". However, checking revealed that the shipment consisted of 3,495 books in Uzbek language in Cyrillic script, 1,495 books in Uzbek language in Latin script and 1,995 books in Karakalpak. The Justice Ministry officially warned the Bible Society that it should not in future commit such violations. "Thus the plot to flood Uzbekistan with illegal literature in the languages of native peoples with the purpose to conduct large-scale missionary activity especially among children and youth failed."

Pitirimova rejected these claims, insisting that in 2008 the Bible Society did not give a list of books to or tell the authorities in which languages the literature was when they asked for the release of the books.

Bible Society members, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of the authorities, complained to Forum 18 of such state controls, asking why people of Uzbekistan cannot import and read Bibles in their native languages.

Why won't the authorities release the Bibles?

In a 16 December 2010 response to the Bible Society, seen by Forum 18, Sh. Irisbayev, Deputy Chief of Tashkent City Customs Authority, said that based on the letters of 12 June, 30 June 2008 and 14 December 2010 from the Religious Affairs Committee, the Bible Society was refused permission to import the concerned literature "as until now requests from religious organisations on the necessity of demand for this literature were not sent". Irisbayev added: "Taking this into account you need within 5 days to present all the documents to re-export this religious literature." The letter does not, however, specify whether both shipments or only the first must be sent back.

Pitirimova said that in 2010, customs officials showed her and Director Voskresensky an official letter signed by the Religious Affairs Committee banning the release of the two shipments, which said that one of the shipments has "Christian literature in the native languages."

Pitirimova said that later on 18 January, Officer Anvar (last name unknown) from the Customs Investigation Division summoned her without giving reasons. When she arrived, she was questioned by another Officer Jamshid (last name was not given) and asked which Customs official showed them the Religious Affairs Committee's letter banning the import of the literature. Among other questions, Officer Jamshid asked who else told the Bible Society that literature in the native languages may not be imported into Uzbekistan. Pitirimova said she believes that Officer Jamshid could be from the NSS secret police.

Reached by Forum 18 on 11 February, Officer Anvar (he did not give last name) noted down Pitirimova's name, but when asked why he summoned her, claimed "It's a wrong number" and put the phone down. Officer Nadyr (he did not give last name) from the Investigation Division said that he "personally did not invite Pitirimova, and Anvar is on vacation now." He referred Forum 18 to the Chief of the Division saying that "only he could comment on this case." Subsequent calls to the Investigation Division went unanswered on 11 February.

Will Religious Affairs Committee release second shipment?

Asked why the Bible Society ordered a second shipment of Bibles from Russia while they could not receive the first shipment, one Bible Society member said, "There are thousands of Christians in Uzbekistan, and the Churches need Bibles." The member said that they ordered Bibles only in Russian in 2010 so there would be "no excuses by the authorities." However, the customs authorities did not release this shipment either, the member complained.

Artyk Yusupov, Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, told the Bible Society in a 4 February letter – seen by Forum 18 – that the 2008 shipment "cannot be imported into Uzbekistan, and must be sent back to the sender, because the literature in Uzbek and Karakalpak languages was presented as literature in Russian language, and at the same time no requests necessary to receive the literature were sent by the existing religious organisations."

Yusupov went on to write that the "second shipment may be released under appropriate procedures if the Bible Society positively resolves the issue with the abovementioned shipment."

One Bible Society member told Forum 18 that "If we send the first shipment back, then how can we be assured that we will receive the second shipment? Who can guarantee, for instance, that the Religious Affairs Committee will not place the books in the libraries instead of releasing it to us?" (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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