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UZBEKISTAN: Under-18s pressured, illegal raids, legal books confiscated

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

In Uzbekistan's Bukhara Region police try to stop males under 18 attending mosques. In Tashkent Region Protestants illegally detained faced police "psychological pressure" resulting in two being hospitalised. In Navoi Region, courts have ordered legally-bought books including Bibles and New Testaments to be confiscated.

In southern Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region the ordinary police and State Security Service (SSS) secret police are openly watching people who go to mosques, especially during Friday prayers, and trying to stop males under the age of 18 attending mosques (see below).

In Tashkent Region a group of 40 Protestants were illegally raided, detained and questioned, police "psychological pressure" resulting in two being hospitalised. Police did nothing to stop four unknown women who accompanied them on the raid stealing property from female Protestants (see below).

In the north-western Navoi [Navoiy] Region, after an illegal raid on a state-registered Baptist Church, police confiscated three Uzbek-language New Testaments, two Kazakh-language Bibles, and one copy of a book for children entitled "Stories from the Bible". Despite the Pastor being able to prove that the books were bought legally and had passed state censorship, courts have ordered that the books stay confiscated and be given to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. "It is a total nonsense", local Protestants stated. "This means that the Church cannot keep its legally bought Christian literature in its building" (see below).

Judges and police have denied the flagrant breaches of the rule of law and due process that happened in the cases (see below).

Mosques still monitored, males under 18 pressured not to attend

Ordinary police and State Security Service (SSS) secret police in the southern Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region are still openly watching people who go to mosques, especially during Friday prayers, human rights defender Shukhrat Ganiyev told Forum 18 on 17 October. Particular attention is given to men and boys under the age of 18. After they are identified, police visit their parents' homes to pressure them into stopping their children from attending mosques, Ganiyev stated. He knows of about 50 such cases involving men and boys since July 2018.

Mosques are under total state control, and the ordinary police and SSS secret police have long openly carried out surveillance of anyone of any faith meeting for worship. Children and young people attending meetings for worship are especially targeted by the authorities (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

However, Ganiyev thinks that in Bukhara Region, officials have put less pressure on Muslim young men attending mosques in 2018 than in 2017. But throughout Uzbekistan, police and SSS secret police have in August and September raided homes and jailed at least eight bloggers "to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedom of religion and belief" (see F18News 20 September 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416>).

Shavkat Rakhmonov, Chief of Bukhara Regional Administration's Department responsible for religious affairs, refused to explain to Forum 18 on 17 October why mosques are under surveillance and men and boys under 18 targeted if they attended mosques.

Bukhara Regional Police also refused to answer Forum 18's questions themselves and then passed Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Khokim Jumayev, head of the police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department". Jumayev on 17 October identified himself when Forum 18 asked questions then claimed that it was a "wrong number".

So-called police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" officers routinely target people exercising their freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Protestant meeting raided, women's property stolen, detentions

On 30 September, about 20 officers of Bostanlyk District Police in Tashkent Region raided a group of 40 Protestants from an ethnic Korean church and other Protestant churches meeting at a Protestant centre in Kyzyl-Su, a Protestant who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 5 October. The police arrived in eight police cars in the middle of the day. Leading the raid were officers Khusniddin Sharipov and Shakhzod (who would not give his last name).

The police also brought four unidentified women with them, who began "pushing retreat participants around, searched the bags of women only, and stole anything they wanted from the bags", the Protestant stated. When the Protestants complained to the accompanying police officers, "they did not react at all" to the open theft of private property.

The Protestant told Forum 18 that they know that in the past the police have "used such women during their raids as witnesses to open prosecutions against Protestants" (see eg. F18News 17 May 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2280>). The authorities also try to pressure members of religious communities into becoming informers (see eg. F18News 6 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2367>).

Illegal search and confiscations

The police then illegally without a search warrant began searching the Protestant centre. They filmed the centre and the Protestants without their permission. Police also confiscated numerous items of church property, including a laptop computer, guitar, overhead projector, loudspeaker, three microphones, three electric kettles, music stands, a writing board, and two Christian books. Also against the law, the police provided no formal record of the confiscations.

Police routinely break the law, and unfair trials are also common (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

About two and half hours after the raid began, police then forced meeting participants (who included babies and young children aged under 5) into a bus and took them to the local Bostanlyk District Police Station. They were kept there for 30 minutes until higher authorities ordered the police to take the Protestants to Bostanlyk District Police Station.

"Psychological pressure" resulting in hospitalisation, illegal detention

At Bostanlyk District Police Station, police applied severe "psychological pressure" to the detainees. This resulted in one of the Protestant woman and a five year old girl having to be taken to hospital.

Torture, particularly against women, is common used by the authorities (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>). Despite President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's claims and legal changes claiming to ban torture and punish the perpetrators, torture continues with many afraid to complain for fear of state reprisals (see F18News 1 May 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374>).

"The police took photographs of the adults and children," a Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "The children were questioned about their school activity. All the detained Protestants had to write statements."

The police released all the detainees at 2 am on 1 October after 12 and half hours of detention. "This is unlawful as the police cannot lawfully detain people in a police station for more than three hours solely for the purpose of identifying them," the Protestant pointed out.

"No such raid took place"

The duty officer at Bostanlyk District Police Station, who refused to give his name, refused to answer when Forum 18 questioned him about the police's illegal actions. He then claimed that "no such raid took place". When Forum 18 asked to be put through to other police officers, including those whose role includes repressing freedom of religion and belief, the duty officer replied: "You cannot talk to anyone because the raid did not take place." He then put the phone down.

Begzot Kadyrov, Deputy Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 17 October. He then put the phone down. The telephones of Jasur Akramov, Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, went unanswered on 17 October. Akramov and other Committee officials routinely avoid answering questions about why the state with the Committee violates people's freedom of religion and belief (see eg. F18News 18 July 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396>).

Church raided, books confiscated, illegal fines, Bible claimed to be banned

On 17 May police in Uchkuduk in the north-western Navoi [Navoiy] Region raided the state-registered Baptist Church's building,

local Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 October. Without the legally-required search warrant, police searched the Church and confiscated Christian books bought from the state-registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

All the confiscated books were also stamped as approved by the Religious Affairs Committee. They were three Uzbek-language New Testaments, two Kazakh-language Bibles, and one copy of a book for children entitled "Stories from the Bible".

Uzbekistan imposes total censorship of all printed and electronic religious literature, and police often confiscate books which have passed the state's compulsory censorship (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

On 4 July the Church's Pastor Igor Zherybatnikov and caretaker Iskhok Urazov were tried at Uchkuduk Court for breaking Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). The Judge fined Pastor Zherybatnikov 861,200 Soms or 5 times the minimum monthly wage, and Urazov 172,400 Soms or the minimum monthly wage, Baptists told Forum 18.

The Judge did not give his name during the court hearing.

The Judge also ordered the destruction of all the literature including the Bibles and New Testaments. Courts often order the destruction of religious texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

"We did everything according to the law"

Major Laziz Sadikov, Deputy Chief of Uchkuduk Police claimed to Forum 18 on 17 October that "we did everything according to the law. We did not violate anything". When Forum 18 asked what exact legal basis the police had for confiscating the books and opening a case against the Baptists, he replied: "Tell the Baptists to come to me and I will explain to them." He then refused to discuss the case further.

Appeal, books still confiscated

On 25 September, Navoi Regional Administrative Court upheld the fines, but ordered that all the books should not be destroyed but instead given to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. This was despite Pastor Zherybatnikov being able to give the Court written proof that the books had been bought legally.

"It is a total nonsense," local Protestants stated. "This means that the Church cannot keep its legally bought Christian literature in its building."

Illegally, the Baptists were not given a written copy of the decision, which is supposed to be provided within three days of the hearing. Without a copy of the decision the Baptists cannot legally make an appeal.

The Judge did not give his name during the court hearing, but an official subsequently told Forum 18 that he was Judge Abubakir Rakhimov.

Judge Rakhimov refused to discuss the case. "If you or the Baptists are not happy with my decision, you can make an appeal," he told Forum 18 on 17 October. He then refused to talk more.

"The confiscated books were illegal"?

Judge Mamura Savurova, Deputy Chair of Navoi Court, claimed to Forum 18 on 17 October that "the confiscated books were illegal", even when Forum 18 pointed out that all of them had passed state censorship and been legally bought.

Asked how she can prove her claim, Judge Savurova claimed that the "Religious Affairs Committee expert analysis of the books says that their import into Uzbekistan is banned". Asked how it is possible that the import of Bibles or New Testaments, which are known sacred texts, is banned, she replied: "You ask that question to the Religious Affairs Committee."

When Forum 18 asked Judge Savurova why the Baptists had illegally not been given a copy of the appeal court decision, she claimed: "On the third day we sent the copy of the decision by mail. It's not our fault if they have still not received it."

An official of the "Expert Analysis" Department of the Religious Affairs Committee, who refused to give his name, refused to answer Forum 18 and put the phone down when asked why the "expert analysis" claimed that the books were banned. "Expert analyses" are often used to justify the confiscation or destruction of religious texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2314.

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>.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
RodelÅ, kka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY