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UZBEKISTAN: Police continue hunt for religious literature

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Police and secret police continue to hunt down religious literature in Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Latest seizures include 15 Bibles from the home of Protestant pastor Viktor Klimov in Gulistan on 17 June, 90 Hare Krishna books seized by police and secret police from a devotee in Bostan on 16 June. Five Protestants in Kungrad were officially warned on 1 June, after bringing religious literature into the country. An official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee has defended such seizures, telling Forum 18 that "the police did have the right to seize Klimov's Bibles temporarily, but they then had to send the books to us for analysis, and we of course will conclude that these books (in other words, the Bibles) are not banned in Uzbekistan," Begzot Kadyrov stated. Such censorship of and restrictions on religious literature violate Uzbekistan's international commitments to freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

As religious literature continues to be hunted down by police and secret police across Uzbekistan and by border guards at entry points, Begzot Kadyrov, a senior official at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs has defended to Forum 18 News Service the government's censorship of religious literature and restrictions on who may import or publish it. In one recent incident, police searching the home of Viktor Klimov, pastor of a Protestant church in Gulistan 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Tashkent, on 17 June confiscated all the religious literature they could find. Among the books seized were 15 Bibles, a Baptist who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 in Tashkent.

Kadyrov, chief specialist at the Department for Non-Islamic faiths at the Religious Affairs Committee, said he was aware of the confiscation of books from Pastor Klimov and other recent literature seizures. "Under Uzbek law the only religious organisations allowed to import religious literature are those with a central administration," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 11 July. "A central administration may only be set up if a religious organisation has eight registered entities in the country." Kadyrov stated that under Article 19 of the 1998 religion law, literature published abroad may only be imported once the religious affairs committee has analysed its content.

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However, Kadyrov claimed that the Religious Affairs Committee does make "concessions" for believers. "Even members of religious organisations with no central administration can import religious literature from abroad if they first send a list of the literature for our approval," he told Forum 18. "Unfortunately, believers often prefer to circumvent the law and the result is that their literature is confiscated. Nevertheless, when this happens we do demonstrate flexibility, as in the case of one group of Baptists who had their car and religious literature returned."

Despite the constant seizures of copies of Christian scriptures, Kadyrov claimed that the Bible is unequivocally unrestricted literature in Uzbekistan. "The police did have the right to seize Klimov's Bibles temporarily, but they then had to send the books to us for analysis, and we of course will conclude that these books (in other words, the Bibles) are not banned in Uzbekistan," Kadyrov told Forum 18. He did not reveal what would happen to the other literature confiscated from Pastor Klimov.

In another recent case, on 1 June the prosecutor of the Transport Procuracy of the town of Kungrad 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Nukus, capital of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan, issued what one Protestant source described to Forum 18 as an "illegal" official warning to five local Protestants. The five - Lepesbay Amarov, Grigori Kogay, Asilbek Kunekeev, Raushan Matjanova and Gulbahor Orimbetova - were warned for trying to bring Christian literature into the country through Nukus airport.

Such attempts to uncover and confiscate religious literature on the country's land borders and at airports are common. On 3 April Shirinai Dosova, an Uzbek-born Protestant pastor from Moscow, was subjected to a strip-search at Tashkent's international airport as she returned to her homeland, according to her detailed account published by the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice. Customs officials were hoping to find that she had religious literature, but when they found none they had to allow her into the country. The search took several hours. Interestingly, Dosova was searched again for religious literature at Tashkent airport as she left again later that month for Moscow. Customs officers examined her personal Bible in minute detail, even putting it individually

through the security scanner.

Dosova wrote complaints about her treatment to the prosecutor-general's office and the justice ministry in Tashkent.

Members of other faiths too face literature seizures. When on 16 June, the prosecutor's office, the National Security Service secret police and the ordinary police searched an apartment belonging to a Hare Krishna devotee Asa Bekabayeva in Bostan, a town on the outskirts of Nukus, ninety Hare Krishna books were confiscated (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602).

In the Baptist case Kadyrov of the religious affairs committee referred to, a group of seven Baptists from Tashkent who had returned by car from neighbouring Kazakhstan with a large quantity of Christian literature had their car and all the literature confiscated by customs officers on 7 March. The seven also faced administrative penalties. Kadyrov insisted to Forum 18 back in April that the seven were simply "smugglers" and that the case had no religious connotations, but promised that if the Baptists appealed to his committee it would be able to help recover the confiscated books (see F18News 7 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=539).

"After many complaints written to many departments, the authorities returned the vehicle and the literature," a Tashkent-based Protestant told Forum 18 on 23 June. The Tashkent Baptist congregation reported that although the car and literature were eventually returned, the fines on the group of Baptists who imported the literature remained. "Now the court executors are demanding that they should pay the fines," the church complained on 9 July.

Religious literature confiscated from the homes of Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses has been destroyed under court orders in recent years (see F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527 , 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455 , 16 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=277 and 9 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=75).

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=546

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

For other recent developments see F18News 15 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585 ; 28 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=595 ; and 11 July

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602

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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