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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Systematic repression of Muslims since Andijan

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Muslims in Uzbekistan – the majority religious community - have noted systematic changes in the state's repressive policy against religious believers, Forum 18 News Service has been told by Islamic sources. All faiths in the country are suffering from an increase in state pressure and tightened restrictions on their activity. One of the most significant changes, Muslim sources state, has been an attempt to reduce Islamic religiosity among young people and children. State instructions have been given to imams about the undesirability of children attending mosques, and the police have on occasion prevented children from attending Friday prayers. Since the crushing of the Andijan events, no medressahs [Islamic religious schools] have been opened in Uzbekistan. Publication of religious literature – already under strict government censorship – has also become more difficult. It remains unclear how many pilgrims the authorities will allow to go on the haj to Mecca.

All faiths in Uzbekistan are suffering from an increase in state pressure and tightened restrictions on their activity since the government's violent suppression of the Andijan [Andijon] events in May 2005, Forum 18 News Service has noted. But Muslims in particular have noted systematic changes in the existing repressive government policy towards religion. Muslim sources in Uzbekistan, who prefer not to be identified for fear of reprisals, have told Forum 18 that one of the most significant changes has been an attempt to reduce Islamic religiosity among young people and children. Publication of religious literature – already under strict government censorship – has also become more difficult.

Forum 18's attempts to discover the Uzbek government's real policy on religion from officials were fruitless. As usual, Forum 18 was told that Aziz Obidov, spokesperson for the government's Religious Affairs Committee, was not at work when repeated attempts were made to reach him by telephone on 1 November. Other Committee officials refused to speak to Forum 18.

As part of an attempt to reduce Islamic religiosity among the young, sources claim that the authorities distributed instructions to imams about the undesirability of children attending mosques. In Bukhara [Bukhoro] in western Uzbekistan and elsewhere, police on occasion prevented children from attending Friday prayers at the mosque. Forum 18's sources also note that since the crushing of the Andijan events, not a single new medressah [Islamic religious school] has been opened in Uzbekistan. Just before the Andijan events a medressah paid for by believers was constructed in the town of Margilan, a suburb of Fergana [Farghona], but after the Andijan events the authorities refused to allow it to open. Islamic religious education in Uzbekistan is under total state control (see F18News 11 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318).

Meanwhile arrests of Muslims continue. Human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from Uzbekistan on 31 October that after the Andijan events the number of court cases against independent Muslims in Uzbekistan increased considerably. Ikramov also noted that before Andijan the authorities usually accused arrested Muslims of being members of the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. (For an outline of this group's violently antisemitic and anti-Western views, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

Today, arrested Muslims are usually accused – normally inaccurately – of being "Wahhabis" or members of another banned Islamist group, Akramia, which played a key role in the Andijan events. For an outline of what is known about Akramia, see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586.

Muslim sources agree that after the Andijan events the number of arrests increased, but they say that the present repressions are significantly less than after the 1999 terrorist attacks in the capital Tashkent. Forum 18's sources point out that after the 1999 attacks the police began arresting women wearing the hijab on the street and men with beards, while after Andijan such excesses did not take place.

Forum 18's sources report that it is now much more difficult to secure permission to publish religious literature than before Andijan. As before, permission is needed to publish religious literature from both the state Committee for Religious Affairs and the state-controlled Muslim Spiritual Board (Muftiate). "Previously the agreement of the Muftiate was a formality, but now the staff thoroughly examine all books trying to find heresy," one source told Forum 18. One of Forum 18's sources added that there is a secret instruction to publish no more than 1000 copies of any single religious book.

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The current limitations on distributing religious literature were preceded by changes to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences which came into force in June instituting new penalties for the "illegal" production, storage, import and distribution of all forms of religious literature, with penalties of up to three years' imprisonment for repeat offenders. At that time, the then chairman of the state Committee for Religious Affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, admitted to Forum 18 that the import of foreign Muslim literature had practically ceased (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

After the Andijan events, Forum 18's sources report, the authorities began to follow more closely the activities of foreign charitable organisations. Since the late 1990s, only one Muslim charity - the Committee of Muslims of Asia, established in 1989 by the Kuwait-based International Islamic Charitable Organisation – has been able to operate in Uzbekistan. The Committee of Muslims of Asia provides material aid, sponsors gifted students, gives financial support to Tashkent's Islamic University (which was set up by the government) and medressah, and distributes copies of the Koran and other Muslim literature that has passed the compulsory censorship of the government's Religious Affairs Committee (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852).

The Uzbek authorities insisted, Forum 18 was told, on the appointment of Abduhakim Matkulov as the representative in Uzbekistan of the Committee of Muslims in Asia. He is an Uzbek citizen and director of the government-controlled Tashkent Kukuldash medressah. "The Uzbek authorities are not opposed to the Kuwaitis investing money in Uzbekistan's social services," one source told Forum 18. "However, they don't want the Kuwaitis to preach their religious views or to have control over such an organisation's activity. Matkulov is the ideal person to control the Kuwaitis' activities."

Haed Ergashev, deputy head of the Committee of Muslims of Asia in Uzbekistan, admitted that only Uzbek citizens work in his organisation, but pointedly said nothing about government restrictions. "The Kuwaitis merely give money," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 2 November. "Foreigners simply don't want to come here."

Foreign non-governmental organisations with any kind of religious affiliation or suspected of having a religious affiliation have been closed down (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852) and foreign citizens involved in religious activity have been deported (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833).

It remains unclear how many pilgrims the authorities will allow to go on the haj to Mecca at the end of December. In recent years, the Uzbek government has restricted the numbers to some 4,200, below the number reported to have wanted to go and well below the quota the Saudi authorities allocate to Uzbekistan (see F18News 19 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=493). Such restrictions continued in 2006 (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711).

The past year has seen increased government control of all religious activity in Uzbekistan. Religious minorities such as Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees have noted increased state attacks on peaceful religious activity (see eg. F18News 16 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=855).

New restrictions have been proposed to punish religious leaders if any members of their communities share their faith with others (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833) and censorship of religious literature has been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805), while massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity were introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720). (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.

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