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UZBEKISTAN: State bars haj pilgrims from pilgrimage

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbekistan is restricting the number of haj pilgrimages – a requirement for all able-bodied adult Muslims who can do so – to some 20 per cent of the country's total possible number of pilgrims, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Controls on pilgrims have been significantly increased, with potential pilgrims having to be approved by local Mahalla committees, district administrations, the NSS secret police and the state-run Haj Commission. "The authorities are deliberately giving a lower quota in regions of Uzbekistan where there are more believers," an Uzbek Muslim told Forum 18. "It would be better if most Uzbek pilgrims were elderly" the state-controlled Muftiate told Forum 18. Turkmenistan imposes the strictest Central Asian controls on haj pilgrims. Apart from Kazakhstan, all the other Central Asian states also ban non-state organised haj pilgrimages. In Kyrgyzstan last year, there were complaints that Kyrgyz places were taken by Chinese Muslims on false passports.

Uzbekistan's state Religious Affairs Committee and state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate) is restricting the number of Uzbek Muslims making the haj pilgrimage to 5,000, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The quota is set by a Haj Commission comprising staff from both state-run organisations, and is higher than last year's state-imposed quota of 4,200. However, it is almost certain that more Muslims want to go on the haj than the state permits, as last year over 6,000 people wished to make the pilgrimage.

Every able-bodied adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime. This year's haj begins at the end of December. Saudi Arabia, as guardian of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, is responsible for setting a quota for every country whose people want to make the haj. This is set at 1,000 pilgrims per million residents of a country, giving Uzbekistan a possible quota of over 25,000. But the Uzbek authorities' restriction of the numbers allowed means that only a fifth of the Muslims who could potentially make the haj can actually make it.

Control over haj pilgrims has tightened since last year. Zafar Tursunov, of the Muftiate's International Department told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 28 November that the state-limited quota of 5,000 people will be spread among the Mahalla committees. These are the lowest level of state authority, corresponding to a city district, and are a key instrument in Uzbekistan's restrictions on its citizens' religious freedom (see F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698).

The Mahalla committees will allocate haj places, as they did until 2005 (see F18News 19 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=493). The names of those approved by the Mahalla committee will then be sent to the national Haj Commission, which can also veto pilgrimage applications.

"The authorities are deliberately giving a lower quota in regions of Uzbekistan where there are more believers, such as the Fergana [Farghona] Valley," one Muslim, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 from Namangan in late November. "In Namangan, for example, lots of people have asked several times to make the pilgrimage, and yet in Karakalpakstan [Qorakalpoghiston], where the population is less religious, places on the pilgrimage can end up unfilled."

The Karakalpakstan region, in north-west Uzbekistan, is known for attacks on religious freedom, with all Protestant Christian activity of any kind being illegal in the region (see F18News 16 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=855).

The US-based political scientist Alisher Khamidov, amplifying comments he originally published in eurasianet.org, told Forum 18 that in February 2006, soon after the end of the last haj at the beginning of this year, the Namangan regional administration adopted an instruction restricting pilgrims to those aged between 40 and 65 years. He said other regions are reportedly preparing to implement similar measures.

Muslims in the strongly Muslim Fergana Valley told Khamidov this summer that, in addition to Mahalla committee controls, potential pilgrims must be endorsed by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the district administration. Only then is the pilgrimage application sent to the Haj Commission for it to consider.

State control of pilgrims is further enhanced by the state's insistence that pilgrimages can only be made using the state-run airline,

Uzbekistan Airways (see F18News 19 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=493).

Tursunov of the Muftiate denied to Forum 18 that there is a specific ban on younger pilgrims. "There is no ban on young people making the haj pilgrimage and there will be young people among the pilgrims this year," he told Forum 18. "But it is true that we are trying to persuade young Muslims not to use up the quota. It would be better if most Uzbek pilgrims were elderly." He did not indicate why the state has decided this.

Additional obstacles face Uzbekistan's Shia Muslims, estimated at around 300,000 people, who are mainly ethnic Iranians in the south of the country. Shia customs are markedly different from those of the majority Sunni Muslims, causing Uzbek Shia pilgrims difficulty when travelling in Sunni-dominated pilgrimage groups from Uzbekistan (see F18News 27 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=307).

However, Turkmenistan still imposes the strictest controls in Central Asia on haj pilgrims (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711). In early November the Turkmen government announced that, as in previous years, only 188 pilgrims will be permitted – only enough to fit on one aeroplane of the state-run Turkmenistan Airlines – far below the quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities.

With the exception of Kazakhstan, all the other Central Asian states also ban haj pilgrimages which are not organised by the government and insist that pilgrims must use national state-run airlines.

In Kyrgyzstan pilgrims could in earlier years travel to Mecca independently, reports Shamsybek Zakirov of the state Religious Affairs Committee. "Numerous tourist companies took advantage of this and took pilgrims to Mecca by bus," he told Forum 18 from Osh on 28 November. "But many of these companies were quite unscrupulous and as a result a number of pilgrims who set off by bus last year simply never reached Mecca." Zakirov said that this was why the Kyrgyz government issued a decree, on 13 December 2005, that pilgrims can only make the haj pilgrimage using the national airline.

Zakirov also said that the government had limited the number of Kyrgyz pilgrims to 4,500 and that pilgrims have to be approved by the local authorities where they live. "Anyone can make the haj pilgrimage, if he has the 1,500 dollars needed to travel to Mecca," he told Forum 18. "But the number of people who wish to make the haj pilgrimage will be even lower than the established quota." Kyrgyzstan's population is around 5 million, putting the total number of haj pilgrims permitted by Saudi Arabia at around 5,000. It is certainly possible that Zakirov's prediction may be proved right.

However, last year Kyrgyzstan was given 4,500 places by Saudi Arabia, but a further 2,000 applicants complained of being unable to travel. They claimed that about 2,000 Kyrgyz places had been taken by Muslims from neighbouring China who had bought faked Kyrgyz passports (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711).

In Tajikistan, controls have loosened this year. "Until last year the government had a quota for the number of pilgrims, but this year, the only limit on the quota has been set by Riyadh itself," Hikmatulla Saifullozoda, head of the Islamic Revival Party's analysis centre, told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 28 November. "The quota is so high that we simply will not find that many people in Tajikistan who wish to make the pilgrimage." Tajikistan's Islamic Revival Party is the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia.

Muslims in Kazakhstan have not so far complained about any government-imposed restrictions. "The only restriction on travel to Mecca is the quota imposed by Saudi Arabia, which is several times higher than the number of potential Kazakh pilgrims," Murat Telibekov, head of the independent Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 from Almaty on 28 November. "Therefore Kazakh believers have no difficulty in making the haj pilgrimage." (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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