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UZBEKISTAN: Government issues orders to religious communities

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A three-page document from a regional state administration in Uzbekistan, seen by Forum 18 News Service, reveals the extent to which state officials expect religious communities to obey them. Amongst other directives, a Protestant pastor is ordered to draw up a plan with the state Religious Affairs Committee "to prevent missionary activity." Regional representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims and of the state Religious Affairs Committee are ordered "to bring under constant close observation all officially registered religious organisations" and "to strengthen the struggle with people conducting illegal religious education and organising small religious gatherings." Officials have refused to discuss with Forum 18 why, although religion and state are formally separate, officials issue orders to religious communities. Echoing Soviet times, officials see no reason not to interfere in the internal life of religious communities, and expect that their orders will be obeyed.

Despite conceding to Forum 18 News Service that religion and the state are supposed to be separate in Uzbekistan, a senior state official has refused to explain why the regional authorities feel free to issue instructions to religious communities. "You should address your questions not to me but to the Religious Affairs Committee," the senior religious affairs official in Andijan [Andijon] regional Hokimat (administration), Shaket Gulomov, told Forum 18 from Andijan on 8 May.

The Uzbek Constitution's article 61 states that: "Religious organisations and associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The state does not interfere in the activities of religious associations."

Uzbek government instructions to religious communities are revealed in a leaked three-page document from the regional Hokimat, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, covering the decisions taken at a high-level meeting in April. The purpose of the meeting was to review the Hokimat's work with religious and social organisations in the first quarter of 2007.

Gulomov of the Hokimat refused absolutely to say on what legal basis officials issue such instructions to religious communities, or why the Hokimat even needs to discuss religious affairs. He also refused to answer any general questions about the work of his department and put the phone down.

Also unable to explain why state officials were issuing instructions to religious communities was the state Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent. Reached on 3 May, an official giving his first name as Arakjon (he would not give his last name) told Forum 18 that no-one was available, but that the Committee would respond to Forum 18's questions in writing. As of 21 May, Forum 18 has not received the Committee's responses.

One of Andijan region's deputy hokims, Hotambek Ketmonov, was in the chair at the 13 April meeting and signed the official record of it the following day. The meeting was also attended by Gulomov of the Hokimat, as well as by at least six other officials from the Secretariat for Links with Social and Religious Organisations. It remains unclear whether N. Mamajonov, the regional representative of the state Religious Affairs Committee, was present, although he was among officials assigned specific duties at the meeting.

The record of the meeting provides proof of the involvement of Andijan regional Hokimat officials at all levels in controlling religious activity by supposedly independent religious communities. Regional officials are particularly keen to stamp out bona fide religious activities which the Uzbek government has banned - in defiance of its international human rights commitments. Such banned activities include spreading one's faith and conducting religious worship and education without state approval. Forum 18 believes that local officials in other parts of Uzbekistan exercise similar control over religious communities in their area.

Already well-known is the tight scrutiny of and interference in the activity of local religious communities by committees of mahallas (urban districts). Ostensibly these are self-governing bodies, but in practice are the lowest level of top-down official control (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

In addition, law-enforcement agencies – especially the National Security Service (NSS) secret police – also maintain tight scrutiny. Apart from threats and direct pressure on religious communities, the NSS in particular conducts routine surveillance of religious worship, intercepts telephone calls and e-mails of religious leaders and recruits spies within religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

The 13 April Andijan Hokimat meeting began with a report by Gulomov on what religious and social organisations in the region have been doing in the first three months of this year. It remains unclear from where he assembled his information on the activity of religious organisations. It is possible the information came from other Hokimat officials, the police, the prosecutor's office and the NSS secret police.

Although many of the nine instructions to non-Hokimat staff issued at the meeting related to state care of disabled people and those still suffering from the aftermath of being involved in cleaning up contamination after the 1986 explosion at the nuclear power station in Chernobyl in Ukraine, two cover religion.

Point 3 declares in full: "Instruct the pastor of the church of Full Gospel Christians, R. Jalilov, to draw up a plan together with the commissioner of the Religious Affairs Committee for the [Andijan] region, N. Mamajanov, with concrete measures to prevent missionary activity in the region."

Point 7 states in full: "Instruct the representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the region, N. Holiknazarov, jointly with the commissioner of the Religious Affairs Committee for the [Andijan] region, N. Mamajanov, to bring under constant close observation all officially registered religious organisations in the region:

- to explain the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations during measures conducted in religious organisations;
- to hold explanatory talks in mahallas and places of residence and in educational institutions to unmask religious extremism and terrorism, as well as people who have arrived there and who pervert true Islam, and in this connection to strengthen explanatory work as well as to increase the number of such meetings;
- to require imam-hatybs and representatives of mahallas and society jointly to get involved in improving the surroundings, giving special attention to improving places of burial and cemeteries;
- and to strengthen the struggle with people conducting illegal religious education and organising small religious gatherings [hujras]."

Uzbekistan's Religion Law bans the spreading of one's faith and the country's Criminal Code prescribes harsh punishments for those who violate this ban. The officials' instruction to Andijan's registered Jesus Christ Full Gospel church comes as pressure mounts on local Protestants. Dmitry Shestakov, who is pastor of an affiliated Pentecostal congregation, was sentenced on 9 March to four years' imprisonment in an open work camp for leading his church. At his trial, mahalla officials accused Shestakov of running an illegal religious community and conducting missionary activity, revealing how closely they had monitored the activity of his congregation (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

The Hokimat's instruction to the Muslim community illustrates the way the state controls the entire structure of the Muslim Spiritual Administration, using it in particular as a cover in crushing independent Muslim activity outside its framework. In requiring imams to speak out against "extremism", "terrorism" and "perversions of true Islam", officials call for imams to speak not only against Islamist-inspired terrorist movements – such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – but against peaceful Muslims who practice their faith outside government control. The government – apparently deliberately – makes no distinction between Islamist radicals and peaceful Muslims, branding them all as "extremists" and "terrorists".

The government's insistence that all Muslim activity take place only within the structures of the Spiritual Administration also benefits the Administration, as it prevents the development of rival networks of mosques.

Forum 18 notes that when Uzbek officials speak of "explaining" the law on religion, they generally mean setting out what the law bans in the area of religious practice, in particular the ban on unregistered religious activity and spreading one's faith.

In many ways the tone of this record of decisions taken at the meeting echoes that of countless documents drawn up in the Soviet period and preserved in the archives across the former Soviet republics. As in Soviet times, officials in the Andijan Hokimat see no reason not to interfere in the internal life of religious communities and do not hesitate to issue orders to them. Officials also appear to share the expectation of their Soviet predecessors that such orders will be carried out.

Uzbekistan's state-run mass media continues to attack religious minorities, particularly targeting Protestants (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=950). Jewish and Russian Orthodox representatives have appeared with state officials on state-run national TV, to incite intolerance of freedom of thought, conscience and belief, as well as intolerance of religious minorities (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890).

In the most recent known sentence for peaceful religious activity, Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev was given a two-year suspended jail sentence for "violating the procedure for teaching religion". He could be jailed if he commits any further "crime," such as any religious activity the authorities do not like. (see F18News 10 May 2007

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=953).(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.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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