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UZBEKISTAN: More state media incitement of intolerance

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan continues to use state-run mass media to incite intolerance of religious minorities and freedom of thought, conscience and belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. In the latest national TV attack, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists were all described as conducting unspecified "illegal missionary activities." This was described as "a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction." A Protestant shown in the film told Forum 18 that it used police film taken during raids on worship. "It was very unpleasant, I felt like I had no privacy," Forum 18 was told. "Believers from our church are angry at this." Police had claimed that the film "was necessary for further investigation." The film has encouraged intolerance, a member of a religious minority stating that some people are now "afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted." However, Forum 18 was told, "people who understand a little bit what's going on in the country sympathise with us." The state TV official responsible for the film could not explain to Forum 18 why he was involved in attacking human rights.

Uzbekistan's state-run First TV Channel has broadcast a one hour film inciting intolerance of religious minorities, particularly those who share their beliefs with others. The film – the latest in a series of attacks on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the Uzbek state media – was broadcast in Uzbek in the early evening of Saturday 17 May and was entitled "In the clutches of ignorance." It reached a wide audience across Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has found.

The film particularly singled out unspecified "missionary activities" for attack, BBC Monitoring transcribing the film as describing them as "a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction." Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists were all described as being responsible for this "global problem." The film claimed that Uzbek citizens' "low political awareness and legal culture make them an easy target for the missionaries." Sharing beliefs with others is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, breaking the state's international human rights commitments (see eg. F18News 5 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1043).

As has been the case with past films inciting intolerance of religious minorities, the film included interviews with persons who were claimed to be "senior officials" of religious communities. In this instance the film included interviews with Russian Orthodox and Catholic representatives, along with persons claimed to be "religious and political experts" as well as state officials. Uzbek TV has in the past falsified interviews discussing human rights in the country with people who are not state officials. Zulhaydar Sultonov, chair of the government's Religious Affairs Committee – who has also appeared in previous state media attacks – stated that Jehovah's Witnesses "are carrying out comprehensive work at the moment, aimed at turning local people - be that Uzbeks or representatives of another religion - away from the path they chose and from their religion".

"Missionary activities have become a part and a tool of the influence being exerted on us, for exerting political influence, advancing one's own interests, no matter whether it is economic or political," Baxtiyor Bobojonov claimed. He works at the Al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, and was described as a "theologian and political scientist." Bobojonov also claimed - without producing any evidence - that most missionary activities are funded from outside Uzbekistan, stating that "there are no philanthropists in today's world. If these funds are provided, then, of course, an interest lies here."

A theologian from the state-controlled Islamic University, Jasur Najmiddinov, claimed that "we all know that representatives of the Protestant movement played a significant role in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine," adding that missionary activities are "geopolitical games". Students and staff of the Islamic University are closely monitored by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Sultanov of the Religious Affairs Committee and others previously took part in a TV programme which described Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses as turning people into zombies and driving them into psychiatric hospitals. Religious minorities told Forum 18 that they noticed levels of intolerance in Uzbek society increased after that film (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890).

The latest film showed film of meetings in religious communities, identifying some individuals as having been prosecuted for "illegal activities." A Protestant from the capital Tashkent, who was shown in the film – who wishes to remain unnamed because of

concern about state reprisals - told Forum 18 on 23 May that he travelled to another region of Uzbekistan later that week. People who the Protestant had not previously met immediately identified the Protestant as having been shown in the film. "It was very unpleasant, I felt like I had no privacy", Forum 18 was told. "Believers from our church are angry at this". They are upset that the film showed on state TV was actually from the police, taken during raids on meetings for worship. "We had recent raids when the police after the service put our people in a line and filmed us," Forum 18 was told. "The police said it was necessary for further investigation."

Showing footage of a church and a synagogue, the film praised what it described as "religious freedom and interfaith accord in Uzbekistan."

Forum 18 has found that the film has made an impact on social attitudes in Uzbekistan. Some Uzbek citizens have been encouraged to condemn members of religious minorities, whilst some members of religious minorities are "even afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted," Forum 18 was told by one member of a religious minority. They also said that: "People who understand a little bit what's going on in the country sympathise with us."

A Protestant from Samarkand [Samarqand] told Forum 18 on 23 May that ethnic Uzbeks in local congregations were now afraid that they would be persecuted by local authorities and by people in the mahalla (district) where they live. Mahalla committees play a key role in repressing people's religious freedom (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

"Similar media campaigns took place in the past," the Protestant told Forum 18. "But this time the film was more intense and concentrated on missionaries", he commented. The state has, in his view, been steadily increasing the pressure against religious organisations in recent years.

Sandjar Akhmedov, General Director of the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, would not talk to Forum 18 about the film on 23 May. Akhmedov referred Forum 18 to Olim Toshboev, who is in charge of the division responsible for the film.

Toshboev told Forum 18 on 23 May that the film was not produced either because of orders from other state bodies or because of public demand. "It was just a journalistic investigation", Toshboev claimed. He also claimed that the National TV and Radio Company's attitude to religious freedom was that everyone in Uzbekistan is free to believe what they want. "We have a State Law on Religion which gives people freedom to choose their religion", he said.

However, Toshboev could not explain to Forum 18 why – if state TV supports religious freedom – he was involved in broadcasting a film attacking the human rights of Uzbeks to choose to follow any faith they like, such as Christianity and other minority faiths. "Look, we are not criticising anyone, but if you still think we are then why don't you write your questions to us in a letter so we can answer you", Toshboev claimed.

One independent human rights defender from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 23 May that he thought the film was shown on the orders of other state bodies. "President Islam Karimov wants to divert attention from the socio-economic problems to other spheres as religion, etc.", he commented. In his view "people are trying to find daily food to survive and the state does not know how to address the problem." "So," he continued, "the state tries to start witch-hunts everywhere to divert people's attention from the problems they face."

He said that he had witnessed 186 cases against believers of various faiths in the recent past. Commenting on the film's claim that unspecified "missionary activities" were "a global problem" along with "terrorism," the human rights defender stated that "many times believers were branded as terrorists by the authorities and jailed." But, he added, law-enforcement agencies were not able to show him one real terrorist in the cases he had witnessed.

The current media campaign comes as raids, fines and literature confiscations against religious communities in Uzbekistan continue. In one case police and a schoolteacher bullied the children of Baptists, threatening them with jail if they went to church (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1135).

Voice of Freedom reported on 28 April that local authorities are stepping up measures against missionary activity. Residents of several districts in Tashkent told the agency that had been told by local law-enforcement agencies to inform on any missionary activity they saw.

In another recent state-run media campaign, targeting Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent, the church was accused of conducting "illegal" missionary work and "hypnotising" people. It was also claimed that "when false preachers run out of words and dollars to attract credulous parishioners into their network they turn to psychotropic substances," the author alleged. "What is most terrible is that the greedy pastors tried to stupefy the minds of our children," a state-run newspaper claimed (see F18News 18 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1073). (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 on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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