

25 June 2008

UZBEKISTAN: Protestants reject government's religious hatred encouragement

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Leaders of 26 Protestant congregations across Uzbekistan have published an open letter rejecting state-controlled TV stations' repeated broadcasts of a film encouraging intolerance and hatred of religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Protestant leaders also condemn "garbled facts, aggressive attacks, lies and slander" against named individuals and churches by the state TV broadcasts, and accuse the state and those who took part in the film of violating Uzbek criminal law through the broadcast. The leaders also complain that the state-controlled leaderships of schools and colleges strongly encouraged students to watch the film and so encouraged religious hatred and intolerance among young people. State-run newspapers and websites carried linked articles attacking religious minorities and their sharing of their beliefs, one such article stating that religious minorities "have one aim: to infringe on human freedom with all the consequences that flow from it." Officials Forum 18 has spoken to now either say they know nothing of the protest, or refuse to discuss the film. But one participant defended it.

Leaders of 26 Protestant congregations across Uzbekistan - including from the capital Tashkent and Nukus, Urgench [Urganch], Bukhara [Bukhoro], Samarkand [Samaqand], Zarafshan [Zarafshon] and Andijan [Andijon], many of them from the Full Gospel Church – have complained in an open letter to the First Channel of Uzbek state television about a recent film that they say slandered their churches. The programme – "In the Clutches of Ignorance" – has been shown on national television twice. Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service from Uzbekistan that there has been no response to the letter.

Officials Forum 18 has spoken to now either say they know nothing of the complaint or refuse to discuss the programme.

Previously, a TV official was willing to discuss it (see F18News 23 May 2008

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133). However, a participant in the programme told Forum 18 that he rejected any complaints and dismissed any thought that the programme stirred up hostility to religious minorities.

The Protestant leaders state that "the film is reminiscent of the distant communist times when propaganda goals were pursued with the use of garbled facts, aggressive attacks, lies and slander, which the unenlightened Soviet television viewer would accept as truth." Their letter contrasted government attempts to portray an atmosphere of tolerance with a film depicting their churches as "destructive sects". It said the use of slow-motion pictures, dramatic and fear-inspiring music and tension-raising intonation by the announcer showed the filmmakers' aims: "to stir up the society of Uzbekistan against Protestant churches".

One Protestant told Forum 18 that the authorities' aim was "to stir up Muslims against Christians." The programme was first shown on the First Channel of Uzbek TV in Uzbek on 17 May, and was repeated in Russian on the Sport Channel on 9 June, just ahead of two matches in the Euro 2008 football championship. The film attacked a number of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists (see F18News 13 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1143).

The film was shown amid a renewed wave of official pressure on religious minorities, with raids, fines, detentions, beatings and confiscations of literature all stepped up (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1135).

The 15 June letter from the church leaders complained that the film expressed "open intolerance towards Uzbekistan's Protestant Churches" and called for an end to such attempts. The letter was also sent to state agencies, the media and human rights groups, and was posted on the church's website www.church.uz.

Azamat Usmonov, head of the International Relations Department of the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, said he did not know whether anything was being done about the letter of protest sent to his TV channel. "I do not possess any information on that letter," he told Forum 18 on 23 June from Tashkent. Asked whether state TV would give a right of reply to religious organisations depicted in the film, Usmonov said he could not answer. "Put your questions to Uzbek-Kino [Uzbek National Cinema Agency] who produced the film," he said. "If the film does not reflect reality, it is not our fault."

Reached on 19, 20 and 24 June, Ikrom Saipov of the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre in Tashkent told Forum

18 that he had not seen the film and was too busy to say what religious communities attacked in the film should do to protect themselves from officially-sponsored religious intolerance. Eventually he promised to respond if Forum 18 sent its question in writing, which it did on 24 June. Saipov had not responded by late on 25 June.

Also refusing to answer any of Forum 18's questions was Begzot Kadyrov, deputy head of the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. He immediately put down the phone when Forum 18 reached him on 19 June.

Defending the film and his role in it was Jasur Najmiddinov, a master's student at Tashkent's Islamic University. "I didn't read the open letter," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 June. "But I don't think there were wrong things in the film. They cannot prove this. Let them go to court if they think they can prove they are right."

Najmiddinov denied that freedom of thought, conscience and belief is restricted in Uzbekistan. "To say religious freedom is persecuted here is absurd," he claimed. "But religious organisations have to work within the law – this is the only way. The ones that are punished are those that break the law." He claimed that the only people who complain are "little sects with few members". He described the Jehovah's Witnesses as "illegal" and alleged that they buy signatures to meet the hundred adult citizens required to apply for registration. Asked for evidence of this, he said he had seen "interviews on television".

According to Najmiddinov, the film did not incite inter-religious conflict and hostility, an offence punishable under Article 156 part 2 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code, as the authors of the letter suggest. "This is not true," he insisted to Forum 18.

The film made some members of religious minorities "afraid to go out on the street where they live for fear of being persecuted," Forum 18 was told (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133).

Najmiddinov says he was approached by the programme makers to take part. "The history of missionary activity and modern missionary movements is the theme of my dissertation, that's why perhaps I was chosen," he told Forum 18. In the film, 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" (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133). He says he was not paid for his part in the film. Students and staff of the state-controlled 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).

Surat Ikromov, a Tashkent-based independent human rights advocate, suggested to Forum 18 on 20 June that the Presidential Administration probably asked the television station to show it. As Uzbek TV is state-controlled, he argued that "they cannot on their own initiative undertake such politically sensitive coverage."

Protestants Forum 18 has spoken to – who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities – say that the programme may perhaps not be the precise cause of specific new police or NSS secret police moves against their churches and individuals. However, they point out that security agency officers also watch these programmes and they incite further hostility towards religious minorities the government does not like. They also stated that such programmes increase suspicion among the rest of the population about the activity of religious minorities, and increase support for official moves against them.

Uzbek TV is often used for propaganda campaigns against those the government does not like. An hour-long programme with harsh criticism of Radio Liberty's Uzbek service, Radio Ozodlik, was shown on Uzbek state TV on 9 and 10 June.

The church leaders' letter about "In the clutches of ignorance" is specific in its complaints. It denies claims in the film that the head of the Full Gospel Church, Sergei Nechitailo, lives off foreign money; that Pastor Felix Li of the Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent is a criminal (a criminal case against him of violating customs procedures was withdrawn as he had not been involved); that Pastor Norimon Ismoilov in Fergana [Farghona] had used deceit to steal the property of a woman and her child; that Protestant churches use psychotropic substances, including to attract new adherents if "ingratiating words and dollars" fail; that drugs found in the Grace Church were psychotropic (they were legally imported for charitable distribution and were bona fide medicines); that Satanists who conduct human sacrifices are connected with Protestant churches.

The church leaders accuse the filmmakers of violating with these claims Article 139 part 2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes slander in the media, and Article 140 part 2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes insult in the media.

The church leaders accuse several of the commentators interviewed in the film of stirring up anger towards "so-called sects and missionaries". It quotes remarks by Baxtiyor Bobojonov of the Al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences: "In the missionaries' documents there is a lot against our religion and our prophets. Ordinary people speak up against this." The church leaders accuse him of using unfounded allegations to stir up inter-religious hatred and conflict, which they say violates Article 156 part 2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes deliberate insult to citizens' religious or atheist feelings with the purpose of stirring up hatred and intolerance towards a section of the population.

The letter complained of the interview with a psychiatrist Azimov, who declared in connection with Protestant pastors: "Leaders of

sects above all pursue their personal material interests."

The church leaders also complain that the state strongly encouraged students in schools and colleges to watch the film. One notice quoted by the letter stated: "The academic leadership of the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan earnestly asks the professorial/teaching and student body of the conservatory to watch the documentary film 'In the clutches of ignorance', which will be shown on the First Channel of Uzbek Television at 9.40 pm on 17 May 2008."

Religious hatred and intolerance is also promoted by other state-run mass media. In a recent example of this, on 6 June the Russian-language official newspaper "Narodnoe Slovo" published an article by Maksud Jonihonov following up on the film. He claimed to be "in shock" at the misdeeds of missionaries as reported in the film, who he insisted had no justification for their activity and represent a "direct, open threat" to people.

Jonihonov quotes approvingly the ban on "missionary activity" in Article 5 of Uzbekistan's Religion Law and criticises the distribution of religious literature in Uzbek. After seeing in the film that religious "sects" allegedly use drugs to attract adherents, he writes: "Now there is no longer any reason to rack your brains over why people – renouncing the holy faith of our ancestors, Islam – so easily accept the 'teaching' of other sects." Jonihonov says renouncing one's faith is as serious as other "sins", such as treason to one's country. He likens missionaries to terrorists, particularly criticising Jehovah's Witnesses.

Another recent example of the state promotion of religious intolerance and hatred was an 18 June article on the state-controlled news website Gorizont. The author, Aitmurat Alniyazov, is head of the N. Davkaraev Institute of Language and Literature of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. This is an area of north-western Uzbekistan with particularly harsh repression of religious minorities, where all non state-controlled Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity is a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Alniyazov's article attacks those trying to convert others to their faith, describing them as "wolves in sheep's clothing". He particularly singles out for attack religious communities which are working "illegally" in Karakalpakstan, including the Emmanuel Protestant Church, the Isa Masih Protestant Church (a Korean Presbyterian church), the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The article names individuals from the Isa Masih Church, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. It remains unclear whether the newspaper attack heralds a crackdown on the named individuals. However, Karakalpakstan's state agencies have again stepped up harassment of religious communities that function without state registration (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1150).

"The list is long, but they have one aim: to infringe on human freedom with all the consequences that flow from it," he claims. He is particularly annoyed about what he regards as the conversion of the "native" population (ethnic Karakalpaks and Uzbeks) "who have traditionally professed Islam".

Alniyazov praises the punishments handed down on religious leaders, including the January 2007 fine of 100,000 Soms on local Protestant Makset Jabbarbergenov, though complains that this did not stop his activity. Jabbarbergenov fled Uzbekistan and is now being hunted by the Uzbek authorities, who tried to trick the Kazakh authorities into handing him over (see F18News 4 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1139). (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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