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UZBEKISTAN: Bible and Mel Gibson film banned in Karakalpakstan

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Nurulla Zhamolov, the senior religious affairs official in Karakalpakstan Region in north-western Uzbekistan has banned the Bible, the Mel Gibson film "The Passion of the Christ", and other religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The bans state that the material – which also include a hymn book, a Bible Encyclopaedia, a Bible dictionary, and a children's Bible - is "banned for import, distribution or use in teaching." The material was confiscated during police and NSS secret police raids and it remains unclear what further activity the authorities may undertake following the bans, or how widely they will be used. No officials in the region or the capital Tashkent were willing to discuss the raids and the country's harsh censorship of religious literature, which applies to religious literature of all faiths. The latest known prisoners of conscience studied the works of Said Nursi, a Turkish Muslim theologian whose works are banned.

Nurulla Zhamolov, the senior religious affairs official for the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Autonomous Republic of north-western Uzbekistan, has banned specific religious books and films confiscated from religious believers on at least three occasions known to Forum 18 News Service in 2009. The confiscations happened during police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raids. Among works Zhamolov has "banned for import, distribution or use in teaching on the territory of the Republic of Karakalpakstan" are the Bible, a hymn book, a Bible Encyclopaedia, a Bible dictionary, a children's Bible, and the 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson, although this has legally been shown in cinemas in the capital Tashkent.

The bans were set out in "expert analyses" provided for court hearings of local Protestants, and revealed in court documents and a prosecutor's office letter seen by Forum 18. Forum 18 has been unable to obtain copies of Zhamolov's "expert analyses".

The authorities in Karakalpakstan routinely confiscate religious literature they find in the homes of religious believers during raids. It remains unclear what further activity the authorities will undertake in the wake of the bans on specific works.

It also remains unclear whether Zhamolov's ban on the Bible includes a ban on the Russian-language Synodal version, a nineteenth-century translation widely used not only among Russian-speaking Protestants but by the Russian Orthodox for private reading outside church services (which are in Church Slavonic).

Forum 18 tried to find out from Zhamolov of the Religious Affairs Committee why peaceful religious communities have been raided, why peaceful religious believers have been detained and fined, why religious literature has been confiscated and why he has issued "expert analyses" banning the import, distribution and use of named religious books in Karakalpakstan. However, the man who answered his phone on 20 May told Forum 18 it was a wrong number. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Officials in the Uzbek capital Tashkent were likewise unwilling to talk about the raids, the confiscation of religious literature or state censorship of religious literature. The official who answered the phone at the government's National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 20 May that its director Akmal Saidov and deputy director Akhmat Ismailov were out of the office, while Ikrom Saipov, who heads the department dealing with citizens' complaints, was on leave.

Asked what the Human Rights Centre has done to defend the religious freedom of Uzbekistan's residents, the official – who would not give his name – responded: "I cannot provide any further information. Come to our Centre and you can read our last annual report in our library." Asked whether the report is available on the internet, he responded: "I'm afraid not."

The official who answered the phone on 20 May of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent – who gave his name as Murat – told Forum 18 he was a trainee and was unable to answer any questions. He said no other Committee official was in the office.

Karakalpakstan's ban on non-approved religious communities

Karakalpakstan – where state controls on religious activity are among the tightest in the country - makes up more than a third of

Uzbekistan's territory but has only five per cent of its population.

Only state-controlled Islamic activity is allowed in Karakalpakstan. The only other religious activity permitted is at the Russian Orthodox parish in Karakalpakstan's capital Nukus, which began building its own church in summer 2005. All Russian Orthodox activity outside Nukus, as well as all Old Believer and Protestant activity across Karakalpakstan, is banned, as is the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees or any other religious community.

A wave of arrests of Muslims in Karakalpakstan took place in 2008. The authorities' accused a number of imams of financial irregularity or drugs possession, but it remains unclear whether such accusations are true or an excuse to punish them for their religious activity.

Reports said over 50 Muslims were arrested in Turtkul District of Karakalpakstan during summer 2008 on charges of extremism. It said they were accused of reading Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari's book 'Sahih al-Bukhari', as well as the books of Muhammad Sadik Muhammad Yusuf, the former Mufti of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. Imam al-Bukhari's book is a 9th century A.D. collection of hadith, which Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic hadith compilation (see F18News 23 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1208).

One local resident told Forum 18 in early 2009 that he had heard that twelve young men who he believes wanted "an honest and pure Islam" were turned in to the authorities by the local state-approved imam. "Others of those arrested were accused of corruption – they could well be guilty," the resident – who asked not to be identified – told Forum 18.

Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have long faced harassment. State pressure extends even to children. One Protestant parent in Karakalpakstan told Forum 18 that in 2008 a child of known Protestant parents was denied a sports medal they should have received in school because of their family's religious affiliation.

Pressure against school children who attend places of worship - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents is also normal elsewhere in Uzbekistan (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Religious literature and film bans

The bans by religious affairs official Zhamolov are the latest in a series of "expert assessments" – usually not made public – which have seen a whole range of Muslim, Christian and other religious publications and recordings banned. Other "expert assessments" declare that specific religious publications are only allowed "for internal use of registered religious organisations". The existence of such "expert assessments" often becomes known in court hearings where members of religious communities face prosecution for owning such works.

Extremely harsh censorship is applied to all religious literature in Uzbekistan, even to standard texts such as the Bible and Koran (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Despite a 23 April 2004 Cabinet of Ministers resolution that allows only the Religious Affairs Committee to conduct such "expert analyses", courts have often used analyses conducted by university lecturers, as happened in the March 2007 trial in Andijan [Andijon] of Protestant pastor Dmitry Shestakov (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Uzbek courts frequently order confiscated religious literature to be destroyed (see F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195).

An Uzbekistan-wide ban on the works of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi has been followed by the imprisonment of at least 25 people in 2009 who studied his works (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289).

Meanwhile, raids on peaceful religious meetings in private homes have continued elsewhere in Uzbekistan, with religious literature regularly being confiscated (see eg. F18News 31 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1276).

Bible banned

Polat Smetullaev – who lives in the town of Khodjeli, close to Karakalpakstan's capital Nukus - complained to various state agencies after a police and NSS secret police raid on his family home on 20 February without a warrant, during which his personal Bible was confiscated (see F18News 16 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1268).

In a 26 March response to one of Smetullaev's complaints, seen by Forum 18, Khodjeli District Prosecutor, S. Ibrahimov, insisted that the raid had been justified as Smetullaev's mother "gathers known women and gives them religious teaching" in her home each Tuesday and Friday". Ibrahimov noted that when officers arrived they found a Bible and a book, Butiki ot Niny (Boots from Nina),

open on the carpet around which those present were sitting. He said these two books were confiscated for an "expert analysis".

"According to the conclusion of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan of 29 February 2009 [sic – there was no 29 February in 2009]," Ibrahimov wrote, "the books presented are banned for import, distribution or use in teaching on the territory of the Republic of Karakalpakstan".

The prosecutor's office had therefore warned Smetullaev's mother Aksulu that if she carried on religious teaching without "special religious education" and without the approval of a registered centralised religious organisation, she would face administrative punishment and, on a second offence, criminal prosecution.

Between the raid and Ibrahimov's letter, Smetullaev's father (Aksulu's husband) died and the family faced severe problems trying to have him buried (see F18News 16 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1268).

New Testament, Bible Concordance and Bible dictionary banned

In a separate recent case elsewhere in Karakalpakstan, another Protestant Valeri Adamia was found guilty on 16 April of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "illegal production, import, storage of distribution of religious literature". Judge J. Khoshanova of Takhiatash Court handed down a fine of twenty times the minimum monthly wage, 560,800 Sums (2,442 Norwegian Kroner, 278 Euros or 380 US Dollars).

The verdict – seen by Forum 18 – reveals that Adamia's home in the town of was raided by police on 17 March. Officers found and confiscated 14 Christian books, including Bibles, a New Testament, a Concordance, a hymn book, a Bible Encyclopaedia, a children's Bible and a Bible dictionary, as well as computer equipment and personal notes. Both Adamia and his wife denied in court that there was anything illegal in owning the books, which they say they bought in Tashkent. They said they did not give their books to anyone else and that no "unknown or suspicious people" came to their home to read them.

However, the verdict reveals that religious affairs official Zhamolov presented an "expert analysis" of the books confiscated from Adamia's home "lead to religious conflicts with other religions and are banned for import, reading or distribution on the territory of Karakalpakstan". On the basis of this, the court found Adamia guilty.

Judge Khoshanova ruled that two Bibles and the computer equipment should be returned to him, but 12 of the books and his personal notes were confiscated. Unlike in other similar cases, where such confiscated religious literature is ordered destroyed, the verdict does not reveal what should happen to Adamia's confiscated books.

"The Passion of the Christ" banned

In the wake of a 31 January police raid on the Nukus home of local Protestant Eleonora Zhumaniyazova as she was celebrating her birthday with friends, she was found guilty on 9 April in her absence of violating Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines. Judge B. Urumbaev of Nukus District Criminal Court handed down a fine of 140,200 Sums (608 Norwegian Kroner, 69 Euros or 95 US Dollars).

The verdict – seen by Forum 18 – reveals that an analysis of six DVDs the court said were taken from Zhumaniyazova's flat was conducted by the Religious Affairs Committee. In its "expert analysis", the Committee concluded that the Mel Gibson film "The Passion of the Christ" and five other film recordings were banned for import, distribution and use in Karakalpakstan. The verdict gives the date of the analysis as 10.12.2009, presumably a mistyping of 10 February 2009.

Protestants who asked not to be identified complained to Forum 18 that the hearing was illegal as it took place more than two months after the alleged offence, a violation of procedure. They also complained that trying her in her absence was a violation.

Five other Protestants present at Zhumaniyazova's birthday party who were also threatened with punishment were not brought to court, Protestants told Forum 18.

In the wake of the raid, Protestants told Forum 18 that the five men who raided the birthday party – two of whom were in police uniform - brought with them the two religious books they claim to have discovered during a search of her flat. The police subsequently refused to tell Forum 18 whether Zhumaniyazova is allowed to meet with her Christian friends or not (see F18News 10 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1252).

Forum 18 notes that when "The Passion of the Christ" was released in 2004, it was shown in Uzbek cinemas including two in Tashkent. Local film website kino.uz ranked it the second most popular film in Uzbek cinemas in late July 2004. (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=1170.

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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