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UZBEKISTAN: Raids and confiscations as state wants "religious organisations which will stay quiet" ?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan's NSS secret police with other officials have carried out two raids on an officially registered Baptist church in the capital Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Over 50,000 Christian books, a large quantity of printing and office equipment, and a sum of money personally belonging to one person were confiscated. In contrast to the confiscated literature and equipment, no official record was made of the confiscation of the money belonging to a church member was made. Later, three church leaders and the caretaker were given fines ranging between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary. Officials have refused to give reasons for their actions, but there has recently been a harshening of official actions against the possession and supply of religious literature. One Tashkent Baptist, asked by Forum 18 what might be behind the raids and confiscations, commented: "The authorities are interested in having small pocket-size churches and religious organisations, which will stay quiet and not have much religious activity."

Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police with other officials have carried out two large raids on an officially registered Baptist church in the capital Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Over 50,000 Christian books, printing and office equipment, and a sum of money personally belonging to one person were confiscated, the Church being left with "almost nothing" a Tashkent Baptist told Forum 18 on 19 April. Later, three church leaders and the caretaker were given massive fines. Officials have refused to comment on the case.

Raids

The fines followed two raids on the Hamza District Church on 7 and 11 April. The first raid was led by Major Khamid Kurbonov of Hamza District Police, and broke into the 12 Kungrad Street Church building at 10 am in the morning. They then searched the Church for 12 hours, ending at 10 pm (22.00 hours). Officials seized 7,110 Uzbek-language booklets entitled 'Jesus, the Son of Abraham and David', as well as 1,120,000 Soms (3,580 Norwegian Kroner, 460 Euros, or 660 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) which is the personal property of a church member.

The Confiscation Protocol, which Forum 18 has seen, is signed by Major Kurbonov – but it only lists the literature. The confiscated money is not mentioned, and the booklets are described as having been "kept in the building for fifteen years".

NSS secret police and the ordinary police made a second raid on 11 April at 10 am, breaking into a private flat on 87 Ashrafiy Street which belongs to the Church. The officials led by Hamza Police's Senior Lieutenant Nabi Abdurakhmonov carried out a search lasting 14 hours until midnight (24.00 hours).

Printing equipment and other material confiscated

The Confiscation Protocol, also seen by Forum 18, is signed by Senior Lieutenant Abdurkhmonov and records the confiscation of:

- 52,130 books comprising 2,644 individual titles. Forum 18 was told that this is approximately 10 metric tonnes (9.8 tons) of printed literature;
- 6 desktop computers, 7 computer processors (CPUs), 6 keyboards, 2 Uninterruptible Power Supply computer batteries, and 4 sets of audio speakers;
- 6 black and white printers and 1 laser-colour printer;
- 2 photocopy machines;
- 2 scanners;

- 1 book binding machine;
- 1 photo camera;
- 1 paper-cutting machine;
- 2 videotape recorders;
- 1 television set;
- 160 video tapes and 334 audio tapes;
- and 262 CD and DVD disks.

The Protocol does not list the confiscated books, but Forum 18 was told that they included:

- 426 Bibles and 638 New Testaments in Russian;
- 284 Uzbek-language New Testaments;
- 113 Bible Encyclopaedias;
- 26 Commentaries on books of the Bible;
- 15 Dictionaries of Biblical words and phrases;
- and numerous books of fiction, sports and technical manuals, and school textbooks.

A member of another registered Baptist Church of the Baptist Union in Tashkent, who for fear of state reprisals wished to remain anonymous, told Forum 18 on 19 April said that the confiscated books were "in fact the library of the Church collected for years." The Baptist asked "Does not a Church and Christians have the right to own Christian books and read them?" The Baptist commented that the officials left the Church with "almost nothing".

"Expert analyses" - and then what?

The confiscated literature was sent to the state Religious Affairs Committee for "expert analysis". "Church members are afraid that the Committee will decide not to return it to the Church", Forum 18 was told on 19 April.

Such alleged "expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate (see eg. F18News 20 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1298). A very strict censorship regime is applied against religious literature and other material of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Fines

Judge Javdat Ubaydullayev of Hamza District Criminal Court on 14 April fined four Church members under the Code of Administrative Offences' Articles 184-2 ("Illegal storage, production, import, or distribution of religious materials"), and 240 Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

Galina Shemetova, another Baptist from Tashkent – who was physically assaulted by police as she left hospital - was also in April fined 50 times the monthly minimum salary for allegedly breaking Article 240 Part 2 (see F18News 15 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1563).

From the Hamza District Baptists: Church Pastor Konstantin Malchikovskiy and Church Secretary Dmitriy Arzhanov were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary, 4,973,500 Soms (15,860 Norwegian Kroner, 2,030 Euros, or 2,930 US Dollars);

- Choirmaster Boris Zabirko was fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary, 3,978,800 Soms (12,688 Norwegian Kroner, 1,840 Euros, or 2,344 US Dollars);

- and Caretaker Aleksey Teselkin was fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary, 2,486,750 Soms (7,930 Norwegian Kroner, 1,015 Euros, or 1,465 US Dollars).

Judge Ubaydulloyev's Assistant, who would not give his name, told Forum 18 on 19 April that he "cannot say why" the four Baptists were given such heavy fines. Judge Ubaydulloyev "is hearing a case at the moment," he added. "Please, call back in an hour and he

will answer you." Called back, the Assistant refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Ubaydulloyev saying that "he is busy." When asked if he could put Forum 18 through to the Court's Chair or one of the Deputies, he claimed that "everyone is busy" and put the phone down.

Why?

A Tashkent Baptist, who for fear of state reprisals wished to remain anonymous, was asked by Forum 18 why they thought the authorities had acted in this way. They replied that the Uzbek authorities "are increasingly reducing Christian activity". They commented that "the authorities are interested in having small pocket-size churches and religious organisations, which will stay quiet and not have much religious activity."

It is unclear why the authorities have decided to confiscate printing equipment, and no reason for this was given during the raids. However, the authorities have been adopting an increasingly harsh approach to the supply of all religious literature, Justice Ministry officials telling the Bible Society "there is no need to import Bibles" (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542).

Members of the Baptist Union in Tashkent have been accused in the state controlled mass media of turning people into zombies and encouraging people to sell their homes and give the money to the Church. One church member described the programme to Forum 18 as containing "outrageous lies". State-disfavoured Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Methodists and Baha'is have been attacked in other broadcasts (see eg. F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

In 2010 the authorities forced a change in the leadership of Uzbekistan's Baptist Union, by imposing large fines on Baptist leaders and denying them the legal right to hold office (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

"I cannot talk to you over the phone"

Senior Lieutenant Abdurakhmanov – who led the second raid - on 19 April asked Forum to call back two hours later, saying that he "cannot talk at the moment". He evaded Forum 18's questions when called back and asked why he and other officials acted as they did. "I cannot talk to you over the phone," he stated. "Please, come to my office tomorrow, and I will tell you." He hung up the phone without answering, when Forum 18 asked whether the authorities are trying to strip the Baptists in Tashkent of all their printed literature and equipment to print literature.

Artyk Yusupov, Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee, was according to other officials on 19 April not in the office to comment. Chief Specialist Begzod Kodyrov's telephones went unanswered that day. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY