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UZBEKISTAN: Anti-Terrorism Police seize religious literature, tear down religious posters

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

In two separate raids in early March, Anti-Terrorism Police and other officials seized religious literature from private homes, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In one raid in Uzbekistan's central city of Samarkand, Anti-Terrorism officer Makhmud Nodyrov "tore posters with Scripture texts from the walls, and kept threatening [home owner Veniamin] Nemirov that his home could be taken away from him, and that his children could be expelled from school," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Personal details of the 25 adults and the family's 12 children present after the Baptist congregation's Sunday service were taken. Four church members face administrative punishments. Asked why he tore down posters in Nemirov's home, and why he threatened that Nemirov's children would be expelled from school, officer Nodyrov referred Forum 18 to the Foreign Ministry, and put the phone down.

Anti-Terrorism Police raided two separate private homes in early March, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In the central city of Samarkand on 9 March, they raided a meeting for worship in a private home, seizing religious literature, ripping down posters with Scripture verses from the walls and preparing administrative cases against four individuals. The following day in the capital Tashkent, Anti-Terrorism Police raided a private home, also seizing religious literature.

Following a February raid on a private home, a court in Kokand in the eastern Fergana Region fined a local Protestant for having Christian materials in a computer seized during the raid.

During the raids, National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers may have accompanied Anti-Terrorism Police, ordinary police and other state officials, as not all the raiders would identify themselves.

A new Decree which came into force on 27 January formalises the pre-existing state censorship over religious literature and other materials and allows officials to conduct "joint actions to detect and prevent illegal distribution of materials" (see F18News 12 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1928).

Olimjan Turakulov, Head of the Press Service of Uzbekistan's NSS secret police in Tashkent, declined to comment to Forum 18 on 18 March and asked to send written questions to the Foreign Ministry.

Begzod Kodyrov, the state Religious Affairs Committee's Chief Advisor, also on 18 March declined to comment on any of the cases, and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing. Forum 18 asked the same day why individuals are punished for having religious materials in their computers and why police and other officials seize religious literature – including religious holy books – from individuals' homes.

Administrative charges follow raid

The authorities in Samarkand raided the Sunday meeting for worship of a Council of Churches Baptist congregation on 9 March. Police are preparing administrative punishments against four of its members – Veniamin and Yelena Nemirov as well as Alisher and Oksana Abdullayev, who are married couples. The worship service was held in the Nemirovs' private home, where 25 adults and the Nemirovs' 12 children were present.

Council of Churches Baptists refuse to seek state registration in any of the former Soviet republics, insisting that religious activity does not need state permission.

Charges are being prepared under Administrative Code Article 241 (violation of order of teaching religious doctrines) and Article 184-2 (illegal production, storage, import and distribution of religious materials).

Article 184-2 punishes "Illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials". Article 241 punishes "Violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines". The maximum penalty under Article 184-2 is 150 times the minimum monthly wage

as well as confiscation of the materials, and under Article 241 is a fifteen-day prison term.

Raid

Police and other officials broke into Nemirov's private home after the Church's Sunday morning service had finished and while members were having tea together, Baptists complained to Forum 18 from Samarkand on 12 March. Participating in the raid were six officers of Samarkand Regional Police and others from unknown state agencies. They were led by Makhmud Nodyrov of Samarkand Regional Anti-Terrorism Police, along with three officials of the local mahalla [local district] committee.

Mahalla committees, theoretically independent but in practice under state control, are used to maintain controls over religious believers of all faiths, and have been used to block communities' registration applications (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

First came "an insistent ring of the bell on the gates". The visitors claimed to Nemirov that they represented the City Gas Administration, and "insisted that he must open the door to let them in." As Nemirov suspected that the visitors were not telling the truth, he refused to open the door.

On Nodyrov's order, two officials then climbed over the gates and, taking Nemirov's keys, opened the doors for the other officials. The officials claimed to Nemirov that they came because a "signal was given to them from a school head teacher, who discovered in the school an invitation card to their Church service."

The officials "against the wish of the homeowners" inspected the two houses in the yard, and having found "nothing illegal or no visitors", broke into the basement of Nemirov's home, where Church members were having tea. "They immediately began filming all those present. Then they photographed each one, including small children."

Literature seized, Scripture texts ripped from wall

Officials demanded that the Baptists hand over their religious literature voluntarily. When they refused, officials began a search in the house "without showing a warrant", Baptists complained to Forum 18. "Searched were personal belongings, women's bags and purses, all cupboards, boxes, and Nemirov's children's school bags."

Officials then confiscated literature in Russian: a Bible, New Testament, Christian book entitled "Streams in the desert" and a Christian songbook. Nodyrov "tore posters with Scripture texts from the walls, and kept threatening Nemirov that his home could be taken away from him, and that his children could be expelled from school."

After recording the personal details of all the present, officials demanded that church members register the Church officially so the state "can control the believers", the Baptists told Forum 18. When church members told officials that they cannot do so, they took photocopies of the Nemirov and Abdullayev couples' personal documents and left, warning that they would soon be summoned for questioning. Police did not give Nemirov a copy of the official report.

"Who gave right to children" to distribute leaflets in school?

Nodyrov of the Anti-Terrorism Police told Forum 18 on 17 March that the Police referred the case to court, but refused to identify which court. He also refused to say what punishments he expects to be given and to whom.

Asked why the Police and other organs raided the Baptists' meeting for worship and why this was an issue for the Anti-Terrorism Police, Nodyrov claimed that "they distributed leaflets in school". "Who gave them the right to do so?" he asked.

Asked why Police took photographs even of small children, Nodyrov responded: "Those small children gave out leaflets in school." Asked why he tore down posters in Nemirov's home, and why he threatened that Nemirov's children would be expelled from school, he referred Forum 18 to the Foreign Ministry, and put the phone down.

Head teacher tells police of "possible threat" by Baptists

The raid was reported by state-sponsored 12uz.com on 11 March, a report followed up by other news agencies. They accused the Baptists of conducting illegal religious activity, and particularly attacked Nemirov.

12uz.com reported that Samarkand Regional Police and other law-enforcement agencies (possibly the NSS secret police) "prevented illegal activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists," and that "on a signal received from a director of a school the law-enforcement agencies uncovered an underground illegal Baptist organisation."

K. Narzullayeva, head teacher of Samarkand's Secondary School No. 48, "warned the Samarkand Regional Police of a threat that Baptist Christians are spreading in the school their religious literature and invitations to their secret gatherings," 12uz.com reported.

"It turned out that ten-year old Nadezhda Nemirova, daughter of ardent Baptist Nemirov, is a pupil of the school. The girl was the messenger between the pupils of the school and illegal activity of her apology for a father."

"Neither the warnings by the local mahalla Committee nor the administrative fines given to him could stop Nemirov. Not even the fact that he has a family, for which he is responsible, would stop him," the agency claimed. "Besides that, citizen Nemirov established in his home an underground organisation and illegally distributed religious literature in the city's schools, he also involved family members in this criminal activity."

School head teacher Narzullayeva (who refused to give her first name) on 17 March insisted to Forum 18 that "Nemirov's daughter gave out invitations to the schoolchildren to their Church, and it is against the law." Asked what is wrong with inviting children to Church activity, she responded: "This is a school, and no religion or religious activity should take place here, and children must not be involved in religion."

Asked if she had been instructed to inform the authorities on similar incidents, Narzullayeva refused to say. "I do not want to talk to you about these questions." She told Forum 18 that she has not been invited yet as a witness before the court, but she will attend the hearing if invited.

"Aggressive sorties of missionaries"

Nemirov had been fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage following an August 2012 raid on the church. Two other church members were also fined (see F18News 29 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1773). He had also been fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage in September 2010 (see F18News 26 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1503).

In its report, 12uz.com insisted that "modern day trends require the State to protect itself from unapproved, illegal, and unregistered cases of religious activity. (...) The current laws and Uzbekistan's Constitution above all, as well as the Religion Law do now allow anyone forcibly to impose on others their religious teachings. And therefore, any aggressive sorties of missionaries will be continually prevented, guaranteeing a just inter-confessional peace and accord in our country."

Tashkent "anti-terrorism" raid, literature seized

Seven officials in Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District, only one in police uniform, in the afternoon of 10 March raided the private home of Vera Raupova, a member of the unregistered Bethany Baptist Church. The raid was led by Alisher Nasyrov of the District's Anti-Terrorism Police Division and local Police officer Shukhrat Nurmukhamedov.

A local Baptist, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 that the authorities broke into her home without showing any identity documents or warrant "under the guise of a passport regime checkup".

Officers searched Raupova's home and confiscated Christian books and materials, the Baptist complained to Forum 18. Confiscated were 166 books in Russian, bought from Uzbekistan's officially registered Bible Society, including 5 Bibles, a New Testament, Bible Atlas, and Bible Dictionaries, as well as 200 brochures, 7 magazines, 4 notebooks with personal notes, and a pocketbook.

Asked why Raupova's home was raided without a warrant, Inspector Nurmukhamedov on 18 March told Forum 18, "These were the organs which oversee religious activity, and I was only accompanying them." He added that "they wanted to check her books, and sent them for religious expert analysis." Asked why the authorities must confiscate Bibles or New Testaments well known as Christian holy books, Nurmukhamedov responded: "I did not confiscate the books but the Anti-Terrorism Police did."

Asked which division Nasyrov represented, Nurmukhamedov said he did not know. Asked who it could discuss the case with from the Terrorism Police, he responded that, "I need to call the Division and ask them first," and asked Forum 18 to call back. Called back the Inspector declined to discuss the case or refer Forum 18 to Terrorism Police. "The Police Chief is busy, and I am only a small man in this case."

Fine follows Kokand raid

Judge Begzot Ergashev of Kokand City Criminal Court on 7 March, with a decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, found Abdulhafis Ashiraliyev guilty under Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Judge fined Ashiraliyev, a member of an unregistered local Protestant Church, 10 times the minimum monthly wage or 961,050 Soms with confiscation of his personal computer.

The fine followed a raid by Kokand Police on Ashiraliyev's private home on 1 February, as seen from the Court decision. A local Protestant, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 that by raiding Ashiraliyev's flat, the Police and other local authorities "infringed on the inviolability of the home". Only three of the ten raiders were in police uniforms. The officials searched his home, and confiscated a laptop computer.

As seen from Judge Ergashev's decision, according to the 14 February religious expert analysis (it does not indicate who wrote it), Ashiraliyev stored in his personal computer Christian materials, which do "not contain extremist teachings," but "contain teachings aimed at carrying out religious propaganda among the population." Thus the Court deemed it "adequate to punish" Ashiraliyev for "illegally storing religious materials on his personal computer".

Judge Ergashev on 18 March declined to comment on the case. Asked why an individual is not allowed to store Christian texts on his computer and read them, whether he has to ask the State Religious Affairs Committee each time what he can or cannot store on his computer, he wrote down the details of the case, and asked Forum 18 to wait on the line. However, no one returned to the phone.

After several further calls, an official of the Court (who refused to give her name) said that "Judge Ergashev is hearing a case, and we cannot answer your questions over the phone." She asked Forum 18 to send written questions to the Supreme Court.

Tashkent Region raid, literature seized

Meanwhile, six officials of Tashkent Region's Akhangaran District, three of whom were in police uniforms, broke into the private home in the village of Nurabad of Nadezhda Taymurzina, member of an officially registered local Baptist Church. This raid too - mid-morning on 31 January - was "under the guise of a passport regime checkup".

Among the raiding officials were Shavkat (last name not given), Chief of Nurabad Police, and Police Inspector Vakhit Azizov, as well as Bakhri Yuldashev, Deputy Head of the village Administration.

The officials "conducted an unapproved search in her flat, during which they confiscated 20 Christian books, including a Bible and New Testament in Russian as well as an Uzbek language New Testament. Confiscated also were 8 Baptist magazines, a local Baptist, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of State reprisals, told Forum 18. The Baptist pointed out that most of the confiscated literature was legally bought from the officially registered Bible Society. (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=1862.

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.

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