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UZBEKISTAN: One year on from Andijan

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

13 May 2006 is the first anniversary of the violent suppression of the Andijan uprising, which the OSCE thinks may have resulted in the deaths of between 300 and 500 people. Forum 18 News Service has been trying to establish whether these events have changed the religious freedom situation. It is hard to isolate Andijan-related events from the ongoing attack on human rights in Uzbekistan, but violations against the religious freedom of people of all faiths have clearly become worse. Much remains unknown about the Andijan events, including whether or not the Akramia group – which was at the centre of the events – is a peaceful religious group. Currently, Protestant Pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev describes the situation in Andijan as very tense. "Rumours are circulating that on 13 May demonstrations will be held." He told Forum 18 that police patrols have been stepped up and that many Muslims are being called in for "preventative talks" with the police and the NSS secret police.

13 May 2006 is the first anniversary of the Uzbek authorities' violent suppression of the Andijan uprising, in the strongly Muslim Fergana [Farghona] Valley of eastern Uzbekistan. Forum 18 News Service has been trying to establish whether the Andijan events have in the past year affected the authorities' approach to religious freedom. However, as religious freedom has been under continuing attack from the authorities in recent years, it is hard to isolate Andijan-related events from the ongoing attack on human rights in Uzbekistan.

A crackdown on religious communities followed the Andijan events. The background to the events included Uzbek President Islam Karimov's fear of having to – as he had to in the Fergana Valley town of Namangan in 1991 – face the complaints of Uzbek citizens about poverty, corruption and indifference on the part of officialdom, as well as Karimov's fear of calls for an Islamic state (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567). The main impact of the crackdown was to worsen the situation for people of all faiths (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585).

Six months after Andijan increased repression of religious communities, especially Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, seemed to be the main effect, so Forum 18 was told by a variety of sources within the country (see F18News 21 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=692).

Currently, one local resident describes the situation in Andijan as very tense. "Rumours are circulating that on 13 May demonstrations will be held against last year's suppression of the uprising," Protestant pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev told Forum 18 on 6 May from Andijan. He said police patrols have been stepped up in the city and many Muslims are being called in for "preventative talks" with the police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. This has also been Pastor Tuichiev's experience, as the authorities seek to close his church (see F18News 21 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=709).

"There are also rumours that refugees are going to come back to Uzbekistan from Europe in time for 13 May – Tashkent has is said to have promised them an amnesty," Tuichiev told Forum 18.

Surat Ikramov, head of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, reports that the number of arrests of devout Muslims has increased significantly since the Andijan uprising. "Those arrested usually have nothing to do with Hizb ut-Tahrir or with any other political movement," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 May. "The only crime of these people is that they are devout Muslims."

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a self-styled international Islamic political party aiming to recreate an Islamic Caliphate. It is violently anti-democratic, antisemitic, and strongly opposed to core human rights such as religious freedom. An outline of its aims is given at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170. Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned in Central Asia and has had many of its members or alleged members imprisoned.

Ikramov has observed that since the uprising the authorities have started "to apply a wider range of terminology to Muslims under arrest". "In general, almost all the arrested Muslims were accused of "Wahhabism". After about 2001 that term virtually disappeared from prosecutions. From that time, right up to the Andijan uprising, believers were usually accused of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir. Since the events in Andijan the authorities have used a whole range of terminology. Among the Muslims under arrest are so-called members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, "wahhabis" and "akramists"."

Forum 18 has noted that some Uzbek officials have even used the term "wahhabis" for Jehovah's Witnesses (see eg. F18News 8 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=358). It is normally used to imply a Muslim the authorities dislike. The term "akramist" refers to the Akramia group, whose prosecution by the authorities sparked the Andijan events (see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586).

The former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque Obidkhon Nazarov, whom Tashkent has labelled a "wahhabi leader", entirely agrees with Ikramov. "The number of arrests of believers has gone up since the Andijan uprising," he told Forum 18 on 6 May from exile in Europe. "I think it is unhelpful to discuss what terminology the authorities are applying to devout Muslims. The Uzbek authorities themselves are muddled about their own terminology. As soon as there are too many arrests of so-called Hizb ut-Tahrir members, they introduce new terminology – "wahhabis", "akramists" and "salafites". We must not follow the authorities' example by using these terms."

"Salafites" refers to a purist movement within Islam, which seeks to restore Islam as it was at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. In Uzbekistan, Salafites are very small in numbers, and most Uzbek Muslims dislike them. It is unlikely that the authorities are using this term correctly.

In a significant signal of the more repressive atmosphere, Forum 18 was unable to obtain any comment on religious freedom from Muslim theologians resident in Uzbekistan because those speaking to Forum 18 were anxious for their own safety. Prior to the events in Andijan, Forum 18 did not encounter this problem.

Among the religious minorities there is no single view on whether the authorities have adopted a harsher policy towards them since the Andijan uprising was crushed. As might be expected, the Russian Orthodox do not encounter any difficulties with the authorities. "The events in Andijan have not had any effect on the situation of our flock," Fr Nikolai Rybchinsky, press-secretary for the Central Asian Orthodox diocese, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 May.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also feel that the events in Andijan have not in themselves had an effect on their relations with the authorities. "Our situation deteriorates from year to year, but I would not attempt to draw a parallel with the events in Andijan," Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 6 May. "We are seeing a trend that has persisted for several years."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 10 May, the deputy head of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shukhrat Ismailov, strongly denied that state religious policy had been tightened up since the Andijan uprising. "Normal believers continue to experience no problems. It's another matter for members of underground terrorist groups. It is true that there are legal cases under way in Uzbekistan at present against people who are undermining Uzbekistan's constitutional basis and distributing literature containing calls to religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism. I am not prepared to say whether there are such cases have become more or less frequent following the Andijan events. I can assure you of one thing: all these people are suffering not for their religious beliefs, but for their anti-constitutional activity," Ismailov told Forum 18.

Ismailov also claimed that the state often makes concessions to people previously engaged in "anti-constitutional activity" who confess what they have done. "Just before the anniversary of the Andijan events several rank and file Akramia members were amnestied," Ismailov claimed.

Ismailov told Forum 18 that he did not know anything about the recent deportation of the lawyer Kirill Kulikov, a Russian citizen who was representing the interests of Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses in court, and who was detained and deported on 26 April 2006. "I have not yet heard anything about that case. I can only tell you one thing: Jehovah's Witnesses are very active missionaries. They knock on people's doors and hand out their literature. As a result even Uzbeks sometimes adopt their faith, and that is a very bad thing," Ismailov told Forum 18 (see F18News 9 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=775).

Iskander Najafov, lawyer of a Tashkent Protestant church, takes a different view. "Since the Andijan uprising the authorities have tightened up their preventative measures against terrorism. However, these measures 'ricochet' to affect Christians. When Christians meet in private apartments for discussion, the authorities see them as potential terrorists. Since the events in Andijan the number of raids by police on private apartments owned by Christians has risen, as has the number of arrests of believers," Najafov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 May.

Persecution of Protestants has been continuing throughout the country (see eg. F18News 14 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=744) and all Protestant activity is now banned in north-west Uzbekistan (see eg. F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774).

Tashkent has since Andijan notably increased its efforts to isolate believers from journalists and human rights activists. At least three journalists and human rights activists ended up behind bars after the Andijan events. Hundreds of journalists and human rights activists were forced to flee the country. On 13 August 2005 Forum 18's correspondent Igor Rotar was detained and deported from Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631). The authorities themselves subsequently explicitly connected Rotar's expulsion with their ongoing efforts to cut off religious communities from support (see

Also since Andijan, the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee has started to respond to foreign criticisms of the country's religious policy. Previously, the Committee used to ignore such criticism. When the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) <http://www.uscifr.gov> recently recommended putting Uzbekistan on the USA's list of "Countries of Particular Concern" for "flagrant infringements of religious freedom", the Religious Affairs Committee issued a press statement calling USCIRF's findings "unfounded". "The USA is clearly demonstrating its deliberate failure to take into account the actual reality that exists in Uzbekistan. Unsubstantiated accusations of so-called 'repressive actions against believers in Uzbekistan' in their turn give good grounds to believe the USA guilty of 'double standards'," the statement declares.

Forum 18's own correspondent Igor Rotar was accused, in a published interview by the Religious Affairs Committee's Begzot Kadyrov, of "lack of objectivity and prejudice". It has also described Forum 18's editor Felix Corley's writings as being "without foundation," following an interview of him by the Russian newspaper "Gazeta" on 18 April. Interestingly, two hours after Forum 18's correspondent had asked Kadyrov to comment on mass arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Russian news agency Interfax published an interview with an unnamed member of the Religious Affairs Committee about their fear of "active missionary activity" (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763).

"It is true that previously we did not always react to unfounded criticism of our policy by the foreign media. But there are limits to anyone's patience. We now intend to refute this disinformation," Shukrat Ismailov, deputy head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 May.

There have been other developments since Andijan – such as a massive rise in the fines for unregistered religious activity (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720) – but there is no clear link of these continuing religious freedom violations with the Andijan events.

The Islamic group Akramia was at the centre of the Andijan events, but it is still unclear if it is a bona fide peaceful religious group, or if it is violent. Their origins date from the founder, Akram Yuldashev, writing an Islamic theological pamphlet in Uzbek, Yimonga Yul (Path to faith), which he states did not touch on political issues, but rather on general moral themes. Those close to group members have insisted on this point to Forum 18, as does the Russian-language translation. The only indirect evidence that Akramia was pressing for violence prior to the uprising is a so-called supplement to Yimonga Yul; it is unknown both who wrote the supplement and whose ideas it contains. The main source of Akramia support in the uprising's centre, Andijan, seems to have been their "Islamic socialist" employment practices. Much is unclear about both Akramia and the events leading to the Andijan massacre, but calls for a credible investigation have been rejected by the Uzbek government (see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586).

Following the Uzbek government's refusal to allow a credible, independent and international investigation into the events in Andijan, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) launched its own investigation. The OSCE "Preliminary findings on the events in Andijan" is at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/15653>. It considers that a realistic estimate of deaths is that between 300 to 500 people were killed either in Andijan or fleeing from the town during the 13-14 May 2005. The OSCE also observed the trial in Uzbekistan of some alleged participants in the Andijan events and its "Report from the OSCE/ODIHR trial monitoring in Uzbekistan, September/October 2005" may be found at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/18840>. Both OSCE reports were categorically rejected by the Uzbek Government. (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

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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