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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Massive fines and jail proposed for sharing beliefs

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbekistan intends to impose massive fines and jail people – and the leaders of their religious communities – for sharing their beliefs outside places of worship, Forum 18 News Service has been told. The proposals were made to a meeting of leaders of registered religious communities, in the capital Tashkent, by the state Religious Affairs Committee. For a first "offence," Forum 18 was told, it is intended to impose a fine of between 200 and 600 times the minimum monthly salary. The second time this "offence" is committed, it is intended to jail the offender and the leader of their religious community for between 3 and 8 years. These proposals are the latest harshening of penalties for peaceful religious activity and, like for example the ban on unregistered religious activity, directly break the international human rights standards Uzbekistan is formally committed to. The country has also – in the latest use of deportation against religious believers – deported to Russia a Baptist who grew up in Tashkent, Forum 18 has learnt.

Uzbekistan is proposing to impose massive fines and to imprison leaders of religious communities, if members of those communities share their beliefs with others, Forum 18 News Service has been told. The proposals were made at a 27 July meeting of religious leaders, called by the state Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent. Those attending the meeting were representatives of state-registered religious organisations, including the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan, the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Central Asia, the Catholic Church in Tashkent, the Jewish community, the Baptist Union and the Full Gospel Church, a Pentecostal church. All unregistered religious activity is – against international human rights standards – illegal in Uzbekistan.

The state Religious Affairs Committee told the religious leaders that they and their clergy must stop their members and those who regularly attend places of worship from sharing their beliefs with anyone outside places of worship. If anyone does share their beliefs outside places of worship, it is proposed that they will be fined between 200 and 600 times the minimum monthly salary, Forum 18 was told. One estimate from within Uzbekistan (detailed accurate economic information is closely guarded by the state) is that the minimum monthly salary is about 12 Uzbek Soms (62 Norwegian Kroner, 8 Euros, or 10 US Dollars).

If anyone shares their beliefs outside a place of worship again, after being fined, Forum 18 was told that the Religious Affairs Committee proposes that they - and the leader of their religious community - will be jailed for between three and eight years.

Leaders of religious communities are fearful of openly opposing the proposals, Forum 18 was told, because of the great danger of reprisals against their communities by the authorities. There is currently a crackdown on religious believers of many faiths taking place in Uzbekistan (see F18News 3 July http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=807, 17 July http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=814 and 20 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=816).

Despite repeated attempts by Forum 18 to question the Religious Affairs Committee about the proposals, it has refused to discuss them. Shoazim Minovarov, who used to be Chairman of the Committee, has been given promotion and is now Religious Affairs Adviser to Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

The proposals to fine and jail people for the sharing of beliefs outside places of worship is in direct opposition to Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – which Uzbekistan is committed to through its UN membership – and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – which the country ratified in 1995.

These binding international human rights standards state – in the words of Article 18 of the UDHR - that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Article 18 of the ICCPR states: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching."

The proposals to break these commitments are further evidence of Tashkent's commitment to breaking human rights commitments it has freely acceded to, including its commitments as a member of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

They are but the latest in a series of worsening changes to Uzbekistan's legal system, which directly contravene international human

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rights standards. The previously existing religious censorship rules have recently been considerably tightened with a new set of amendments, aimed at the production, storage, import and distribution of all forms of religious literature (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805). There were also massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720).

This is not the first time in the past two months that religious believers have been threatened with long jail sentences for peaceful legitimate religious activity. Protestant Pastor Dmitry Shestakov had to go into hiding (see F18News 20 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=803) and then flee the country (see F18News 3 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=807) after apparently being charged with high treason and "inciting ethnic, racial or religious hatred."

Also, Protestant Lepes Omarov – from Karakalpakstan region – where all non-Orthodox and non-state-controlled Muslim activity is banned - has been threatened with up to three years' jail for "breaking the law on religious organisations" (see F18News 3 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=807).

In a further sign of an increased harshening of policy, yet another religious believer has been deported from Uzbekistan. A Baptist who is a Russian citizen, Ivan Bychkov, was deported on 11 August to Russia, Forum 18 has learnt. The deportation was carried out by officials from the Visa and Registration Department of the Interior Ministry in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district of Tashkent. Bychkov was born in neighbouring Kazakhstan but was brought up in Tashkent, where his family still lives. He led a youth group at the Bethany Baptist Church, which is part of the Council of Churches Baptists who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries.

"Bychkov has not been given a reason for his deportation, but his only 'crime' was that of actively preaching the Gospel," a Tashkent Protestant, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 on 17 August. Bychkov's passport was stamped with the words "Deported from Uzbekistan".

The Mirzo-Ulugbek Visa and Registration Department did not answer the phone when Forum 18 made repeated attempts to contact them.

Deportation is an increasing form of attack by the authorities against religious believers. The victims so far have been Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants holding citizenship from other countries, even if they are long-term residents (see F18News 23 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=804, 9 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=775, and 5 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774). Forum 18's own correspondent has also been detained and deported from Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631).

At the same time, Tashkent is continuing its crackdown on foreign NGOs whose activity is thought by the authorities to be linked with human rights and religious activity. Surat Ikramov, of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, thinks that since January 2006, at least 12 foreign NGOs have been closed down. This appears to be part of increasing state attempts to isolate people in Uzbekistan, including religious believers, from the support of people in other countries (see F18News 5 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665, 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784 and 23 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=804). (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.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

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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