

10 October 2006

UZBEKISTAN: Quantity of mercy constrained

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Igor Rotar, Forum 18

About a dozen foreign charities engaged in humanitarian programmes in Uzbekistan have been closed down this year as part of the authorities' drive to shut down religiously-affiliated charities or those they suspect of being religiously-affiliated. Alleged missionary activity by staff members was often cited as the reason for closure. One source told Forum 18 News Service that "several hundred" foreign Protestants working in such NGOs have been forced to leave the country. Surviving recent Justice Ministry check-ups – often the prelude to such closures – have been Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity and the local branch of Hungarian Interchurch Aid, the aid arm of Hungary's Protestant and Orthodox Churches. Uzbekistan's former chief mufti told Forum 18 that the Kuwait-based International Islamic Charitable Organisation is the only foreign Islamic charity still able to work in the country. Forum 18 could not find out from government officials why foreign religious charities are mostly barred from working in Uzbekistan although this is not banned in law.

As part of the Uzbek authorities' determination to close down religiously-affiliated charities or those they suspect of being religiously-affiliated, a dozen foreign charities are believed to have been closed down this year, with one source telling Forum 18 News Service that "several hundred" foreign Protestants working in such organisations have been forced out of the country. Forum 18 has found that only one international Muslim charity is allowed to operate in Uzbekistan, while only small-scale Orthodox and Catholic charity is allowed. Catholic sources have told Forum 18 that the house in the capital Tashkent of the Missionaries of Charity, the Catholic order founded by the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta, has survived a Justice Ministry inspection of its activity. Such inspections have, with other charities, often been the prelude to closure.

Despite this record of closing down foreign religious-affiliated charities, Uzbek officials are reluctant to tell Forum 18 whether foreigners with a religious affiliation are being barred from working in humanitarian projects in the country. Asked by Forum 18 on 6 October whether foreign religious charitable organisations are permitted to operate in Uzbekistan (something not forbidden under Uzbek law) and whether foreigners working for foreign NGOs have the right to talk to Uzbek citizens about religious topics ("preaching" to Uzbek citizens has been given as the reason for closing down several foreign NGOs), Aziz Obidov, spokesperson for the government's Religious Affairs Committee, did not know how to respond.

The Justice Ministry's department for registration of public and religious organisations has been in charge of registering foreign NGOs since 2004, when the duty was transferred from the Foreign Ministry. Staff at the department told Forum 18 that only the department head Jaloliddin Abdusattarov could give the government's attitude to the work of religiously-affiliated charities and the role of religious believers who work for them. Despite Forum 18's repeated attempts to reach him on 6, 9 and 10 October, he was either at lunch, with the minister or at a court hearing. It is Abdusattarov's department which has brought the legal challenges that have led to the closure of the foreign NGOs.

Obidov insisted that the registration of religious non-governmental organisations was not within the competency of his Religious Affairs Committee. "Western journalists are strange people. For example, they telephone us when the police arrest believers. So here we are! They should telephone the police," he complained. When Forum 18 responded that the Committee is responsible for all issues affecting religious believers, Obidov did not know what to say.

Nevertheless, he admitted that before removing registration from the US-based NGO Winrock International, the Justice Ministry sent the Committee for analysis a book published by Winrock entitled "Islom dini hotin-kizlar" (Religion of Islam and Women). "We concluded that the book misrepresented the teachings of Islam and offended the feelings of Muslims," Obidov told Forum 18.

The leader of one Christian humanitarian group closed down this year by the government, James Hall of Central Asian Free Exchange (CAFE), insisted to Forum 18 that his charity conducted genuine humanitarian aid projects with no regard for recipients' faith or otherwise. "I always told the Foreign Ministry we were Christians," he told Forum 18 from the United States on 5 October. "I told them there was no Christianity in the projects – we didn't present Christianity in any of our work. I was honest and I felt they understood."

Although all the group's foreign staff were Christians, Hall says not many of the local staff were and that he discouraged the hiring of local people just because they were Christians. "No religion was pushed in the office – it was a fair place to work," he told Forum

The Justice Ministry's latest check-up of a religious-affiliated charity was of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, who have a house in Tashkent. "The Ministry is studying the activity of its representation on the subject of the observance of Uzbekistan's laws and the accordance with the aims declared in its statute," an unnamed official in the Justice Ministry in Tashkent told the Russian agency Interfax on 5 October. He claimed the check-up was routine.

The website of the Catholic Apostolic Administration in Uzbekistan, www.agnuz.info, notes that the Missionaries of Charity arrived in the country in 1993 and that nine sisters live at their house in Tashkent providing assistance to street children, patients in hospitals and elderly people living alone. The Justice Ministry re-registered the group in March 2004.

Catholic sources told Forum 18 that the Missionaries of Charity knew in advance of the scheduled check-up and were pleased that the Uzbek authorities do not intend to close down the Uzbek branch of the international order. Forum 18 has established that unlike the Protestants, Catholics generally are not having difficulties with the authorities. One possible explanation for this is that the Catholic Church is not engaged in missionary activity and does not use Uzbek when preaching.

Another Christian charity which has apparently survived a Justice Ministry inspection initiated in July is Hungarian Interchurch Aid (HIA), a humanitarian agency founded by Hungary's Protestant and Orthodox Churches. Its European Union-funded project in Uzbekistan helps disabled women and children and their families. "Our objective is to provide assistance to those in need regardless of gender, nationality or religion," HIA's website declares. "Priorities in our aid work are solely determined by needs specified by local conditions."

The local HIA branch was registered by the Uzbek Justice Ministry in 2001 and was re-registered in 2004, an HIA representative told Forum 18 from Budapest. "Our NGO is church-backed, but in our work we do not conduct religious activity," the representative declared. "This is one of our main principles and is part of our rules. The Uzbek government knows this." The representative said that during the investigation into the way the branch was functioning, HIA felt that officials were trying to help the charity to correct any errors in procedures.

Another religious charity that has been able to operate is the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, registered with the Uzbek Foreign Ministry in 2002 and re-registered with the Justice Ministry in 2004. It has this year distributed clothing and shoes brought in from abroad.

In the early 1990s many Muslim charitable organisations functioned in Uzbekistan without registration, but when the new religion law was adopted in 1998, all of them were turned out of the country, Uzbekistan's former chief mufti Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 9 October. Currently, only one Muslim charity - the Committee of Muslims of Asia, established in 1989 by the Kuwait-based International Islamic Charitable Organisation - operates in Uzbekistan.

The former chief mufti said the Committee of Muslims of Asia is fairly active, digging wells, supporting orphans and needy families and sponsoring gifted students. One project provides shelter to 500 orphans, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The Committee also gives financial support to Tashkent's Islamic University (which was set up by the government) and medressah, but Committee staff members do not teach in those establishments. The Committee also distributes copies of the Koran and other Muslim literature that has passed the compulsory censorship of the government's Religious Affairs Committee.

Another Tashkent Muslim who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that the charity has to work within government-set parameters and has to work with the government-sponsored Muslim Board.

Of the NGOs known to have been closed for religious reasons this year, all but two have been US-based and most have been accused of Protestant missionary activity.

On 6 September Tashkent city court for civil cases liquidated the Uzbek branch of a US-based NGO, Partnership in Academics and Development (PAD), the pro-government website press-uz.info reported. PAD declares on its website that it provided small loans to farmers, trained journalists, sponsored business education and mental health consultations, and provided a variety of student services.

Abdusattarov, the head of the Justice Ministry's department that registers religious and public organisations, and his colleague Ahmad Mansurov took part in the hearing. The ministry's complaint was that PAD had violated its statute by conducting missionary activity, citing alleged statements by local people, mainly students in higher education, allegedly accusing foreigners working with PAD of conducting missionary work. One student alleged that a meeting with foreign PAD workers at the Hamkorlik centre PAD had set up at the Uzbek State University of World Languages in Tashkent, foreigners associated with PAD had tried to distribute copies of the Bible and spread "propaganda about the superiority of the Christian religion over Islam".

One Hamkorlik employee alleged that every Thursday groups of about ten converts to Christianity met in private flats and that "the rite of baptism had been held in Tashkent Lake at least once with the direct participation of foreigners". The Justice Ministry had

numerous other complaints against PAD, including allowing local people access to the internet without a licence and using unregistered symbols.

Ulugbek Muhammadiev, billed as an "independent expert" though he is from the government-backed Fund for Regional Politics, told the news agency that because PAD had been included in a US-Uzbek government to government agreement, such "proselytism" by PAD staff "discredits the activity of other law-abiding representations of American NGOs, as well as of USAID itself".

"Imagine the feelings of relatives and friends of those young people who were deceived into changing their faith," Muhammadiev was quoted as declaring. He claimed there was not only a legal but a moral aspect to such NGOs' activity. "Abusing the trust and welcoming attitude of the Uzbek people, under the mask of charitable NGOs a whole network of various Protestant religious organisations were active in the country."

Closed in August was the local branch of the US-based charity Crosslink Development International. The Justice Ministry accused its staff of conducting missionary activities among Muslims and Orthodox believers, of extending illegal money credits, opening branches in the country without registering them with Uzbek executive bodies, as well as other violations of the laws on non-governmental organisations and on religion. In particular, the ministry complained of a grant the charity had made to the Full Gospel Church, regarding this as support for religious activity. The Ministry passed its case to the Tashkent City Court for civil suits, Justice Ministry officials said on 11 August, and the court duly closed down the charity in Uzbekistan on 23 August.

On 8 June, again at the instigation of the Justice Ministry, Tashkent city court liquidated the branch in Uzbekistan of another US-funded group, Global Involvement Through Education. In particular it cited alleged attempts by the organisation's foreign staff to convert local people to Protestantism.

Samarkand City Court had found four foreign members of staff guilty in April of "attempts to convert locals to a religion of Protestant character" and fined. "Witnesses testified during a trial that, under the cover of teaching English, the foreign staff actually called students of local universities to give up Islam or the Orthodox religion, to take up Protestantism," press-uz.info reported on 10 May. "During the trial, various audio, video, CD, print products advocating Protestantism were presented as evidence" (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784).

CAFE finally lost its appeal against closure in Uzbekistan in July after a Tashkent court summarily rejected the group's complaint against earlier court rulings. Legal moves against CAFE's local branches in various cities and towns across Uzbekistan began in April, often accusing CAFE employees of trying to convert local people to Protestantism (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784). Religious freedom news agency Compass Direct reported that with no lawyer willing to take on a case with a pre-determined verdict hovering over it, human rights activist Marat Zahidov served as public defender for the Tashkent trial.

Hall complained that local people had been forced to write statements alleging they had been forced to convert. He said the group had brought local Christians to court to testify that they were not forced to reject these allegations. He also rejected as "far-fetched" government allegations that two CAFE employees had paid local people to convert. "If we were guilty of breaking the law I'd be prepared to carry the penalty, but the charges against us were patently bogus," Hall told Forum 18. "We walked a proper line, meeting Uzbek laws."

In January the authorities halted for three months the activity of two South Korean NGOs, the Institute of Asian Culture and Development and the Korean Foundation for World Aid, accusing them of conducting Protestant "propaganda" and distributing Protestant literature. Both have since closed down.

In the case of the Uzbek branch of the US-based NGO, Winrock International, closed down on 26 July by Tashkent City Court for Civil Cases for publishing the book on Islam and Women, the NGO is completely secular. "We have no religious affiliation – we are a fully secular NGO," a Winrock International representative told Forum 18 on 27 July. "We didn't expect this move, but it's not a surprise as many NGOs have been ousted."

In the wake of the July closure of Winrock, Obidov of the Committee for Religious Affairs was very specific in his criticism of the book. "The content of the book written by Barno Valiev contains several bad mistakes, which in turn, shows absolute religious illiteracy of the author," Obidov told press-uz.info. He also claimed that the book provided "wrong information" about the personality, life and activity of the Muslim Prophet Mohammad. The book formed a misleading picture about Islamic dogma and the history of Islam, he said, as well as the origins of the Koran. He insisted that the book was published in violation of the existing rules and regulations on publication of religious literature.

As well as closing down religiously-affiliated foreign NGOs, the Uzbek authorities began closing NGOs involved in political or social activity in early 2004, a process which speeded up in the wake of the violent suppression of the Andijan uprising in May 2005. Among those closed have been Freedom House and Internews. In April 2006 the government closed down the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

While international religious-affiliated charities face great difficulty working in Uzbekistan, some local religious communities say they are not obstructed in conducting small-scale charitable work without foreign involvement. "No-one is preventing us from doing charitable work: almost every Orthodox church in Uzbekistan is engaged in charitable activity," Aleksei Temnikov, assistant to the bishop of the Orthodox Church's diocese of Central Asia, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 October. "It's just that there are no Russian or other Orthodox charitable organisations in Uzbekistan." (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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY