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UZBEKISTAN: Despite official denials, religious freedom violations continue

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Repression of religious communities from the majority community Islam to religious minorities such as Christians has increased, Forum 18 News Service notes. Protestants have been attacked in state-controlled mass media, such as a student, Tahir Sharipov, accused of holding "secretive meetings with singing," and pressure is applied to stop ethnic Uzbeks attending Protestant churches. Andrei Shirobokov, a Jehovah's Witness spokesperson, told Forum 18 that he has had to leave the country as "my friends in the law enforcement agencies warned me that an attempt was to be made on my life." Religious minority sources have told Forum 18 that schoolteachers have been instructed to find out the religious communities schoolchildren attend and where their parents work. US designation of Uzbekistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" for religious freedom violations has drawn a harsh response. Forum 18 has itself been accused of trying "at every opportunity to accuse Uzbekistan without foundation of repressing believers."

With a continuing and growing catalogue of government repression of Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities that Forum 18 News Service and others have documented, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry on 13 November reacted harshly to the recent designation of Uzbekistan by the United States government as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) for religious freedom violations. Forum 18 notes that, in an apparent sign of increasing nervousness over how the increasingly repressive situation within the country is seen abroad, the Uzbek government has started using more sophisticated websites in Uzbek, Russian and English, to try to counter reports of the situation in the country.

Controls on the majority religious community - Islam - have tightened in the past year, with new arrests of Muslims accused of being dangerous radicals. Control of Islamic literature has been stepped up, while imams have reportedly been instructed about the undesirability of children attending mosques and police in Bukhara have prevented children attending the mosque (see F18News 2 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=864).

Religious minorities are facing mounting pressure. Six Baptists detained after a 27 August raid on a church in Karshi [Qarshi] were given massive fines on 25 October. As is often happens, the court ordered Bibles and other literature to be burnt. A Pentecostal church in Tashkent was raided by some 30 police officers on 13 November, with one of those detained subsequently fined (see F18News 27 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=877). These are the latest in a string of similar attacks on Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees.

Protestants have also come under attack in the state-controlled media. A Protestant student in the capital Tashkent, Tahir Sharipov, was the subject of a highly critical article in the Russian-language daily Narodnoe Slovo on 13 October for holding religious meetings in his flat to attract young people – particularly ethnic Uzbeks – to Christianity. The journalist noted the Uzbekistan's Constitution claimed guarantees of religious freedom. "But," he went on, "missionary activity – that is propaganda for your faith and attracting new members to it – is against the law. For that you need permission from the state authorities, as well as appropriate permission from the governing central body of a religious organisation, in whose name the missionary is working. Tahir Sharipov did not have these authorisations."

The journalist said that after Sharipov's neighbour had reported him to the police for holding "secretive meetings with singing", police raided the flat during a religious meeting, finding people without local residence registration and "thousands (!)" [emphasis in the original] of items of religious literature. The journalist said that Sharipov was given a "small" unspecified fine, and that two Protestants were claimed to have signed statements renouncing their faith. The journalist did not indicate what pressures were applied to the Protestants.

The Religious Affairs Committee told the journalist that, in recent months in Tashkent alone, courts had punished a number of people for "illegal" religious and missionary activity. Six were punished for allowing their homes to be used for worship, while three students were warned for unspecified reasons.

One Protestant leader complained to Forum 18 in early November that there is now pressure on them for ethnic Uzbeks not to attend Protestant churches. The leader said they have been told that it is no problem for ethnic Russians and Koreans to attend, but not

Uzbeks. Earlier this year some Protestant churches were banned from holding services in Uzbek (see F18News 16 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=855).

Pressure has also been stepped up on Jehovah's Witnesses, who now have only one legal religious community in Uzbekistan (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837).

Andrei Shirobokov, spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 that he has had to leave the country for his own safety. "Strangers were regularly coming to my home at night and demanding that I leave the house for 'a talk'. I am in no doubt that this was deliberate provocation on the part of the authorities because of my religious beliefs," he told Forum 18 from Russia on 23 November. "My friends in the law enforcement agencies warned me that an attempt was to be made on my life."

Shirobokov said that, before leaving for Russia, he tried to obtain an exit visa. This is under Uzbek law necessary for travel outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an association of twelve former Soviet republics. However, officials at the Visa and Registration Department in Tashkent's Yunusabad district refused to issue an exit visa to him. "They told me I was registered as a Jehovah's Witness at the Anti-terrorism and Extremism Department," he told Forum 18. "Without an exit visa I cannot leave the CIS, and I cannot be sure that the Uzbek secret police will not try to 'deal' with me on Russian territory."

Forum 18 was unable to reach officials at the Yunusabad Visa and Registration Department, by telephone, to find out why Shirobokov was refused an exit visa.

Several separate religious minority sources in Tashkent have told Forum 18 that all school teachers received an instruction following the 1 September start of the school year, to find out what religious communities (if any) schoolchildren in their class attend, together with details of where their parents work. Forum 18 has been unable to contact any education officials to confirm these reports.

The US Government's 13 November designation of Uzbekistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) was criticised in a 24 November statement on the Foreign Ministry website, as well as on other state-run websites uzreport.com and press-uz.info. This relatively swift response follows rebuttals earlier this year by Uzbek official spokespersons of Forum 18's reports, particularly when Forum 18 reported the tightening of official censorship of all religious literature in June (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

On 3 July, press-uz.info ran a rebuttal from Aziz Obidov, the then spokesperson for the government's Religious Affairs Committee, defending the measures as protecting Uzbek citizens from literature produced by "false religions and radical/extremist doctrines". He claimed that some groups "continue aggressive missionary activities, ignoring local realities." Forum 18 was itself accused by Obidov of "beating the air" and trying "at every opportunity to accuse Uzbekistan without foundation of repressing believers".

The past year has seen increased government control of all religious activity in Uzbekistan. New restrictions have been proposed to punish religious leaders if any members of their communities share their faith with others (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833) and censorship of religious literature has been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805), while massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity were introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720).

Foreign non-governmental organisations with any kind of religious affiliation or suspected of having a religious affiliation have been closed down (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852) and foreign citizens involved in religious activity have been deported (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833).

In its response to the United States' CPC designation of Uzbekistan for violations of religious freedom, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry <http://www.mfa.uz> condemned what it called a "one-sided approach" and "double-standards" on the part of the US. It claimed that members of eighteen religious faiths "freely practice their faith" and denied any cases "in the last few years" of inter-religious conflict or tensions between religious faiths and the government. This denial was issued despite numerous cases of state assaults on religious freedom, documented by Forum 18 and others.

The Foreign Ministry claimed – without any evidence – that what it regards as "Uzbekistan's experience in achieving mutual understanding and mutual respect" has been recognised "in all recent major conferences, seminars and meetings" held by the United Nations. In fact, the United Nations has been highly critical of the human rights – including religious freedom - situation in Uzbekistan. An 18 October report by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (A/61/526 – available in PDF format from within <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/GA/61/documents.htm>) concluded that, given the government's failure to set up an independent enquiry into the brutal crushing of the Andijan uprising in May 2005 and the "persistence of allegations of serious human rights violations", it could see "no improvement" in the human rights situation.

Secretary-General Annan also pointed to the persistent failure of the Uzbek government to respond to requests for UN human rights rapporteurs to visit Uzbekistan to conduct their own investigations. This includes Uzbekistan's failure to invite Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, whose repeated requests to visit since 2004 have received no answer (see F18News 25 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=718).

In a curious comment, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry statement claims that the Constitution and laws create conditions for religious freedom for the country's "traditional religions." It then goes on to state: "As for the activity of various missionary religious movements and sects, in this question the Uzbek side sticks to the basic principles" of the Religion Law. This bans "missionary" activity. Although the Foreign Ministry appears to imply that "traditional" faiths are protected while other faiths are not, Forum 18 notes that all religious faiths are subjected to tight government controls, especially Islam, that is controlled from inside as a de facto branch of the state (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777).

New Uzbek Foreign Ministry spokesperson Aziz Obidov – until recently the spokesperson for the Supreme Court and the Religious Affairs Committee – explained to Forum 18 that the government regards as "traditional faiths" those that have official registration with the country's Justice Ministry. In some other former Soviet republics "traditional faiths" are mentioned in laws – in Russia Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism are singled out as "traditional" in the preamble to the religion law – but not in Uzbekistan's religion law. "We also have religions that have had their adherents in Uzbekistan for centuries," Obidov told Forum 18 on 27 November from Tashkent.

"However," Obidov continued, "the Foreign Ministry in its statement used the term 'traditional' in the widest sense. New religions have arrived in Uzbekistan in the last ten to fifteen years and have gained registration at the Justice Ministry. We believe this is enough time to regard them as 'traditional'." He did not explain why registered religious communities – including Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses – also face repression for peacefully practising their faith.

Obidov warned Forum 18 to give only "objective and thoroughly considered information" and recommended that Forum 18 gain accreditation with his ministry. The Foreign Ministry denied Forum 18 accreditation three years ago, claiming that Forum 18 "is not a mass medium." In August 2005 Forum 18's correspondent was detained, but was released and deported following international pressure (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631). (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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