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Christian persecution on the rise in Uzbekistan where just owning a bible is illegal

By Ruth Gledhill

Christan Today (05.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2d2OL7O> - Increasing numbers of Christians in Uzbekistan are being punished simply for the "crime" of having religious literature at home.

The persecution charity Open Doors is asking Christians worldwide to pray for Christians living under the harsh central Asia dictatorship.

One Christian, Stanislav Kim, was sentenced to two years' corrective labour in Urgench for having religious books at home.

He is now under effective house arrest, living at home with restrictions placed on his movements and a fifth of his wages seized by the state.

This is the second time Kim, a Baptist from the north-western Khorezm region, has been found guilty of this offence, according to Open Doors.

Earlier this summer, a Presbyterian Christian in the capital Tashkent was fined for having religious literature at home. The Christian literature was ordered to be handed to the state-backed Muslim Board.

A criminal trial against him for "illegal" use of computers began last month.

In Zarafshan, a city in Central Uzbekistan, a Baptist pastor and his wife were fined for Bibles and Baptist song books seized from their home.

In Surkhandarya, a region in the southeast of the country, four Baptists were also punished when religious literature was discovered and confiscated during an illegal house search. Officials ordered the destruction of two Bibles, as well as other books and CDs. The authorities claimed that one book was banned because it could be used to spread a faith. They also stated that Baptists are banned in the region because they do not have state registration.

"Please pray for the Christians in Uzbekistan," a source told Open Doors. "It's getting more and more difficult to spread the gospel with literature."

Uzbekistan, where the main religion is Islam and just over 300,000 of the 30 million population are Christian, is ranked number 15 on the Open Doors persecution watch list.

The Russian Orthodox Church is tolerated but other denominations are viewed as sects that aim to destroy the political system.

House churches are regularly raided and Christians can be fined for anything from owning a Bible to having a Christian song on their phone.

Those who convert from Islam endure the greatest persecution, Open Doors reports.

Contradictory "expert analyses", four people fined

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (4.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2dLr9qb> - *Uzbekistan arrested four men, confiscating a book a government "expert analysis" stated was permitted. Adventist Pastor Andrei Ten was later shown a second "expert analysis" banning the book and fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three being each fined smaller amounts.*

Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police on 2 August arrested four men riding in a taxi in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. They then confiscated copies of a religious book, "The Great Controversy", which the Religious Affairs Committee had in writing stated that after "expert analysis" was allowed to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

On 8 August one of the men, Pastor Andrei Ten of the registered Seventh-day Adventist Church, was summoned to a police station and asked to write a statement that he gave out copies of the book. He was only then shown a second "expert analysis" in which the Religious Affairs Committee contradicted itself banning the book. Pastor Ten was on 19 August fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three men being each fined five times the minimum monthly wage (see below).

Many similar cases take place in Uzbekistan against physical and electronic religious literature held by people of many beliefs, often involving sometimes very large fines and jail sentences. In some cases, rape threats and physical abuse has been used by male officials against female religious believers (see below).

Arrested in taxi

On 2 August, police and NSS secret police officers in the Olmazor District of north-western Tashkent detained Pastor Andrei Ten, Olimzhan Mirzamambetov, Anarvoy Ergashev and Rahim Tursunov while they were riding in a taxi. Pastor Ten is from the officially registered local Seventh-day Adventist Church, but Mirzamambetov, Ergashev and Tursunov are not part of this Church and had been hired to do work on its building, Adventists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 September. Officers searched the men and confiscated from each of them a copy of a Russian translation of "The Great Controversy", a book by Ellen White. She was one of the founders of what would become the Adventist Church.

Adventists told Forum 18 that the Religious Affairs Committee had on 2 May written to the Bible Society stating that, after "expert analysis", it was allowing "The Great Controversy" to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

Contradictory "expert analysis"

On 8 August, six days after the men were stopped in the taxi and the books confiscated from them, Officer Shavkat (who did not give his last name) of Olmazor District Police phoned Pastor Ten. Shavkat asked Ten to come to Olmazor Police Station at 5 pm the same day. When Ten came to the Police Station, Officer Shavkat demanded that he write a statement that he gave the books to the three men.

After Pastor Ten wrote the statement, police then showed him another "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee. This contradicted the first "analysis" and stated that "The Great Controversy" is banned.

So-called "expert analyses" are often flawed, or even violate published law. Court trials also often violate the rule of law.

Shovkat Khamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to tell Forum 18 on 27 September why the Committee contradicted itself on the book "The Great Controversy". He referred Forum 18 to Begzod Kadyrov, Chief Expert of the Committee. Khamdamov also refused to answer Forum 18's other questions, and put the phone down. The phones of Kadyrov and other Committee officials were not answered on 27 September.

Cases launched

After showing Pastor Ten the contradictory "expert analysis", Olmazor Police then opened cases against all four men under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Olmazor Police told Forum 18 on 26 September that the only officer named Shavkat who works for Olmazor District Police is Deputy Chief of Olmazor Police Myrzajanov. Forum 18 on 26 September called the mobile phone number from which Ten was called. Officer Shavkat (who refused to give his last name) answered the phone. But after Forum 18 started asking about the case he then claimed that it was a "wrong number" and put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Deputy Police Chief Myrzajanov's land line phone number went unanswered on 26 September.

"Anti-terrorism"?

Asked why cases were opened against Ten and the other three men, Olmazor Police Department on 26 September referred Forum 18 to Makhmud Tolipov, the head of the local Anti-Terrorism Police. Police did not explain what so-called "anti-terrorism" has to do with these cases.

Asked about the case on 27 September, Anti-Terrorism Police officer Tolipov refused to comment. "These are internal issues of Uzbekistan," he claimed to Forum 18. "Talk to our Foreign Ministry and they will explain them to you." He put the phone down.

Four fines

On 19 August Judge Musa Yusupov of Olmazor District Criminal Court of Tashkent fined Pastor Ten, Mirzamambetov, Ergashev and Tursunov. Ten was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, 13,024,000 Soms. The other three men were each fined five times the minimum monthly wage, 651,200 Soms. (Large discrepancies exist between the market and official currency exchange rates.) "Judge Yusupov unlawfully ordered the confiscation of the books," the Adventists stated.

Olmazor Court officials (who would not give their names) between 26 and 27 September refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Judge Yusupov.

Many fines, jail sentences, rape threats and assaults

Many similar cases take place in Uzbekistan. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that between January and July 2016 at least 51 Jehovah's Witnesses across all of Uzbekistan were fined for "offences" related to the possession of religious literature. Fines imposed varied between three and 60 times the minimum monthly wage. They commented that "the use of or even the mere possession of the Bible" outside the building of their only state-registered religious community, in Chirchik, "is considered to be an administrative violation".

Only belief communities that have state registration are allowed to exist, violating international human rights law.

These kind of fines and other punishments for having religious literature affect people of many beliefs. One Baptist, Stanislav Kim, was on 26 August given two years corrective labour living in his home for having religious books at home. Similarly, two Jehovah's Witnesses were on 27 January jailed for 10 days and, with 28 others, fined for "illegal" literature and meeting for worship.

Materials in electronic form are also targeted, Jehovah's Witnesses noting that religious literature and electronic devices were confiscated from the homes of two Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik on 11 May and from two others in Fergana on 11 June. No prosecutions appear to have followed. Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev was arrested on 9 January at Tashkent Airport for having suras [verses] from the Koran and other material on his phone, and at least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones.

During some of raids and confiscations in 2016, male police threatened female Jehovah's Witnesses with rape and also physically assaulted women. Torture is "routine" in Uzbekistan, the United Nations (UN) Committee has found.

Punished for religious books at home

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (29.9.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2eeenMW> - *Stanislav Kim was given two years' corrective labour in Urgench for having religious books at home, something the authorities punish as "illegal". He must live at home under restrictions with a fifth of his wages seized by the state. Courts often order such religious literature destroyed.*

A Baptist from Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region has been punished for a second time within a year for having Christian books at home, which state officials regard as "illegal". As this was a second punishment, Stanislav Kim was convicted under the Criminal Code, receiving a two-year corrective labour sentence.

A Presbyterian Christian in the capital Tashkent was fined in May for having religious literature at home. The Christian literature was ordered to be handed to the state-backed Muslim Board. A criminal trial against him began in September for "illegal" use of computers (see below).

In Surkhandarya Region, four Baptists were punished for religious literature confiscated during an illegal house search. Two Bibles, as well as other books and discs, were ordered destroyed. Officials claimed one book was banned because it could be used to spread a faith. They also claimed Baptists are banned in the Region because they do not have state registration (see below).

In Zarafshan, a Baptist pastor and his wife were fined for Bibles and Baptist song books seized from their home (see below).

And in a district of the capital Tashkent, police arrested four men in a taxi, confiscating a book a government "expert analysis" stated was permitted. Adventist Pastor Andrei Ten was later shown a second "expert analysis" banning the book and fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three being each fined five times the minimum monthly wage.

Religious literature in homes "illegal"

The eight individuals are among many punished for having personal religious literature in their homes. The authorities regard such possession of religious literature as "illegal".

Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers often seize such literature when they raid individuals' homes. Following administrative or criminal prosecutions, courts frequently order that such literature – including scriptures of a variety of faiths – be destroyed.

Officials have in the past insisted that religious literature cannot be kept outside state-registered places of worship of state-registered religious communities. In addition, under Uzbekistan's religious censorship, all religious literature produced in or imported into the country must be approved by the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent.

Shovkat Khamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee, refused to tell Forum 18 on 27 September why individuals cannot keep their own religious literature at home without fear of punishment. He referred Forum 18 to Begzod Kadyrov, Chief Expert of the Committee. Khamdamov also refused to answer Forum 18's other questions, and put the phone down.

Phones of Kadyrov and other officials of the Committee went unanswered on 27 September.

Urgench: Criminal punishment for religious literature at home

On 26 August Judge Alisher Kahharov of Urgench City Criminal Court sentenced Stanislav Kim to two years' corrective labour for having "illegal" Christian literature in his home, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Judge convicted him under Criminal Code Article 244-3. Under the sentence, Kim will live at home under restrictions and one fifth of his wages will be seized by the state.

Article 244-3 punishes "The Illegal production, storage, or import into the territory of Uzbekistan with the purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials, committed after enforcement of an administrative penalty for a similar violation" with a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labour for up to three years.

Kim is a member of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation. Such congregations choose not to seek registration from the state, insisting that they should not require state permission to meet for worship.

Kim told Forum 18 on 15 September that unless the appeal court cancels the decision he will have to find official employment, and on top of other taxes pay 20 per cent from his salary to the State as fines.

Kim filed an appeal to Khorezm Regional Criminal Court on 15 September. "I know that under the Religion Law you must get permission from the authorities for each separate religious book, but two years of paying fines to the State is too harsh punishment simply for keeping my Christian books at home," he lamented to Forum 18.

The Secretary of Judge Kahharov (who did not give her name) several times claimed to Forum 18 that the Judge was busy and could not answer the phone. Finally, on 26 September she told Forum 18 that "You cannot" talk to Judge Kahharov, and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to Kahharov's number the same day went unanswered.

Dilmurod Ochilov, Chief of Urgench Court's Chancellery, told Forum 18 on 26 September Kim was "punished for storing illegal religious literature". Asked why Kim was criminally prosecuted simply for keeping his Christian books in his home, Ochilov put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Urgench: Religious literature seized from home

The punishment followed an ordinary police and NSS secret Police raid on Kim's home in Urgench on 17 May. Officers confiscated Bibles and other Christian books, including one called "Alone to Mecca", a biography of a former Muslim who became a Christian.

Urgench: Criminally prosecuted for similar "violation" within year

The Court decision (seen by Forum 18) says that Kim was prosecuted under the Criminal Code since he had already been punished within a year for "illegally" having Christian literature in his home.

Kim had been fined in August 2015 10 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,184,000 Soms, under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). That fine followed a raid on his home the previous month.

Urgench: Confiscated Christian literature to be handed to Muslim Board

Judge Kahharov with the August 2016 decision ordered the destruction of one of the books confiscated from Kim's home, "Alone to Mecca". The Judge ordered that the confiscated Bibles and other Christian books be handed to the Regional Department of the State-sponsored Muslim Board.

Courts frequently order that confiscated religious literature be destroyed.

Tashkent: Administrative and criminal punishment for religious books at home

Following a 28 April raid on his home in Sergeli District in southern Tashkent, Presbyterian Christian Aleksandr Ko was first fined for having religious books at home, then an extra criminal case was launched against him, local Protestants told Forum 18. During the raid the police and NSS secret police confiscated Christian books and materials as well as his notebook computer and other electronic devices.

On 23 May Judge Shirzod Yuldashev of Sergeli District Criminal Court fined Ko under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 2,604,800 Soms. (Large discrepancies exist between the market and official currency exchange rates.)

The District Prosecutor's Office and General Prosecutor's Office then launched a criminal case against Ko for alleged economic crimes for "illegally using computers and the internet". On 15 September, Judge Muzaffar Kukiyeu at the same court began hearing the case. Four hearings were held between 15 and 26 September. The case is still being heard (see forthcoming F18News article).

Surkhandarya: Visit disrupted, Bibles and other Christian materials seized

On 14 May ordinary police and NSS secret police officers raided the home of Bakhtiyor Odinayev in the village of Tortuvli in Denau [Denov] District of the southern Surkhandarya Region. The raid came shortly after two fellow Baptists, Andrei Serin from Tashkent and Mahmud Hakimjanov from Fergana Region, arrived on a visit. Also present was local Baptist Shamsiddin Begmatov. All four are members of Council of Churches Baptist congregations.

"Roughly one and half hours after we reached Odinayev's home, the local police officer as well as officials of the NSS secret police and other authorities arrived and broke into the flat," Serin complained to Forum 18 on 26 September.

The officials confiscated Serin's and Hakimjanov's personal Bibles and took them together with Odinayev and some of his relatives to Denau District Police.

Surkhandarya: Baptists banned?

At the Police Station, "Anti-Terrorism Police" officer Dilmurod Kurbonov questioned the four. "He warned us that Baptists are banned in the territory of Surkhandarya Region and that we could be arrested," Serin complained.

Later that day, officers brought Odinayev back to his home and searched it. They confiscated several other Christian books and audio-discs. All four were released "late in the evening".

Police returned the passports of Hakimjanov and Serin the next day, 15 May. However, they withheld the passports of Begmatov and Odinayev, telling them that they would be returned only after the case had been heard in Court.

Officer Kurbonov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 26 September. "It was the Court's decision to punish them not mine," he evaded when asked why he raided Odinayev's home and told the Baptists that they are banned in Surkhandarya Region. When Forum 18 insisted and asked why he confiscated the Baptists' Bibles and whether the Baptists are indeed banned in the Region, Kurbonov put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered.

Surkhandarya: Fined in their absence

Cases were prepared against Serin, Hakimjanov, Begmatov and Odinayev under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"), Article 240, Part 2 ("Violation of the Religion Law") and Article 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

The Baptists were summoned to Denau District Criminal Court on 15 August, three months after the raid. When the Baptists told the Court that they had not had time to study the case materials, the Court postponed the hearing. Then four days later, on 19 August, Judge Bakhtiyor Sadullayev heard the case in their absence, Serin complained to Forum 18.

On 7 September Serin, Hakimjanov, Begmatov and Odinayev received Judge Sadullayev's decision by mail, 19 days after the hearing. The Judge had fined each of them seven times the minimum monthly wage, 911,680 Soms.

The decision says that Serin, Hakimjanov, Begmatov and Odinayev "illegally stored religious literature". It also declared that "as members of a non-Islamic religious movement they illegally conduct worship meetings, read books and make comments on them", Serin told Forum 18.

Surkhandarya: Destruction of Bibles and other materials ordered

The decision also records that the 13 Christian books, one magazine and 13 CD-discs seized from the Baptists, including Serin's and Hakimjanov's personal Bibles, were ordered destroyed.

"Under no court decision is the Baptist faith banned in Uzbekistan or in Surkhandarya," Serin pointed out to Forum 18. "This is a flagrant violation of our constitutional rights." He also asked "Why are the authorities destroying Bibles which we purchased from the officially registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan, and which can be legally used in the territory of the country?"

Surkhandarya: Baptist literature "illegal"?

Judge Sadullayev based his decision on two arguments put forth in the "expert" analysis of the religious literature confiscated from the four Baptists provided by the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. This claimed that the "confiscated literature contained the teachings of evangelical Baptists, which is illegal to use in the territory of Surkhandarya Region, since they are not registered there".

The "expert" analysis added that one of the confiscated books, the Biblical book "Proverbs of Solomon" in Uzbek, "can be used for missionary purposes and is therefore banned from importing into Uzbekistan," the Baptists told Forum 18.

"Both charges flagrantly violate constitutional rights to religious freedoms of Baptists and other representatives of the multinational population of Surkhandarya region," Serin complained, "and are a case of discrimination."

Asked why he ordered the confiscations and destruction of the Bibles and other Christian materials, Judge Sadullayev refused to discuss his decision. "I do not know you, and cannot answer your questions over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 26 September. "Please, come to the Court, and we will talk." He then put the phone down.

On 16 September Serin and his fellow Baptists filed an appeal against the fines to Surkhandarya Regional Court, he told Forum 18.

Zarafshan: Punished for religious literature at home

On 28 July, police and possibly officials from other agencies raided the home of Dmitri Butov and his wife Svetlana Butova in Zarafshan in the central Navoi [Navoiy] Region. Butov is Pastor of a state-registered Baptist Church.

"Six officers of unidentified law-enforcement agencies, two of whom were in police uniforms, at 12:00 noon broke into their flat, and conducted an unauthorised search," local Baptists who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals complained to Forum 18 on 24 September. Butov himself was not present, the Baptists added, but his wife was at home during the raid with four children. Officers also photocopied the list of Church members.

On 8 September Judge Utkir Khaidarov, Chair of Zarafshan City Criminal Court, found Butov and his wife guilty under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). Butov was fined 20 times the minimum wage, 2,604,800 Soms. His wife was fined 15 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,953,600 Soms, Baptists told Forum 18.

Judge Khaidarov with the same decision ordered that two Bibles and two Baptist song books confiscated from the couple be handed over to a registered religious organisation, without indicating to which organisation. The Judge ordered that the notebook computer confiscated from them be forfeited for the State's benefit.

Zarafshan Court officials (who refused to give their names) refused to comment on the case on 27 September or put Forum 18 through to Judge Khaidarov. "We do not give comments over the phone," one official said.

Uzbek pastor: 'It will be even worse after Karimov'

World Watch Monitor (07.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cdf8aV> - An Uzbek church leader has said he fears life will be even harder for minority Christians after the death of Islam Karimov, the country's President since 1989.

Karimov, who was installed during the Soviet era, was eventually confirmed to have died on 2 September, after a week of speculation following his admission to hospital.

The current Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, is the favourite to take over. But the appointment of one of Karimov's leading supporters, who has served as his Prime Minister since 2003, would be unlikely to herald much of a change in the way Uzbekistan is run – not least with regard to its tight rein on how religion can be practised.

"If Mirziyoyev becomes the next President, the persecution of Christians will be even worse," predicted the pastor, who did not wish to be named. "Actually, as it seems, it was he who initiated or was at least involved in the persecution of the Uzbek Protestant Church and converts from a Muslim background."

"I don't expect drastic changes," said an Uzbek Protestant, who also wished to remain anonymous. "Christians in Uzbekistan will continue to experience harassment by the government."

Uzbekistan is by far the most populous Central Asian country, with more than 30 million people – twice as many as the second-largest country in the region, Kazakhstan. It is generally considered to have the most restrictive laws in Central Asia. Sanctions on religious literature are particularly stringent. Religious books must be read in designated areas only, such as registered church buildings. Fines are hefty and regularly issued.

At No. 15, Uzbekistan is the highest-ranked Central Asian country on Christian charity Open Doors' 2016 World Watch List, which ranks the countries in which it is most difficult to be a Christian. Karimov's regime was accused of serious human rights abuses, including the systematic use of torture. Uzbekistan has been a "Country of Particular Concern" for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom since 2005.

Open Doors estimates there are around 210,000 Christians in Uzbekistan, but during the last decade not a single church has been able to register. Unregistered religious activity is outlawed, while even registered churches face pressure from the authorities.

Uzbekistan is officially a secular state, although around 90% of the population is Muslim. Almost all of Uzbekistan's Christians are from ethnic minorities. Under Uzbek law, it is illegal to try to persuade someone to change their religion.

In July, World Watch Monitor reported that the "paranoia" of Central Asian leaders over the threat of Islamism was also affecting Christians.

"The attitude of the government towards us will not change, no matter who becomes the new leader," said another Uzbek pastor, who did not wish to be identified. "Of course, we hope for a better scenario, but we have to be realistic. Our government is always afraid of any manifestation of dissidents. It is not clear how, but unfortunately Christian believers fall into the category of potential religious extremists."

An Open Doors expert on Central Asia, who again did not wish to be named, agreed that it is "unlikely that there will be any major changes for the better for the persecuted Uzbek Church. Do we want religious freedom to come? Many Uzbek Christians would surely say 'Yes'! But [whether] the situation will improve, we don't know'.

Paranoia, oppression, extremism

Uzbek Christians fall broadly into four categories:

1. Expatriates

Expatriates are usually left alone by the government because they play by the rules – by not evangelising non-Christians.

2. Russian Orthodox

Russian Orthodox churches are viewed as "historic" churches and are therefore typically run according to government regulations and in registered buildings.

3. Protestants

Protestants, such as Baptists, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, usually function outside government regulations in non-registered buildings, which is illegal. As a result, they face regular raids on their churches/houses, threats, arrests and fines. Many refuse to register for fear of governmental control, but it is almost impossible for churches to register anyway – as indicated by the fact no church has done so in the past decade.

4. Converts from Islam

Christians from a Muslim background often face pressure to recant or reconvert. This can take the form of threats and sometimes physical violence – from friends, families or the local community.

Open Doors says there are three major [“persecution engines”](#) that make life difficult for Christians in Uzbekistan:

1. Dictatorial paranoia

To ensure there is no threat to the dictatorship, only state-run and state-controlled religious institutions are allowed. Christians who practise their religion outside of these institutions are labelled “extremists”.

2. Communist and post-communist oppression

While the Communist ideology may have been buried, its practices, laws and institutions are still in place and used to control people.

3. Islamic extremism

As mentioned above, this group can face threats and/or violence from friends, families or the local community.

Uzbek pastor and family granted asylum in US after 9-year ordeal

World Watch Monitor (02.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2erb5Jx> - Finally, their journey is over. Three years since fleeing Uzbekistan – following four years in a labour camp, house arrest and death threats – Pastor Dmitry Shestakov has arrived in the United States, where he and his family have been granted asylum.

It’s been almost 10 years since Shestakov was first detained, after a raid on his Full Gospel Church in Andijan, south-eastern Uzbekistan. The date was 21 January, 2007. Four years to the day later, he was released.

Shestakov had been found guilty of two offences: the organisation of religious groups and manufacture/distribution of materials that “threaten social safety and public peace”.

He was sent to a prison camp in central Uzbekistan, 450 miles from his home, making it difficult for his wife, Marina, and three daughters, Maria, Alexandra and Vera, to visit.

When eventually he was released, only two church members went to collect him.

“No-one else dared to come, because they’re afraid to attract unwanted attention due to their connection with him,” a charity worker with Open Doors, which advocates for

Christians like Shestakov, said afterwards. Their name was withheld to protect their security. "Pastor Dmitry has to be very careful and everything he does will be strictly monitored. This includes the people he will be talking to, everything he says, everywhere he goes, and much more."

Shestakov himself said he had been "ordered to follow strict guidelines and regulations".

He added: "I am a pastor and I want to serve God, but I have to find a wise way to do this."

But two years later it became apparent that staying in Uzbekistan was no longer possible. After being made to ask the police for written permission to leave his house, and then receiving death threats, Dmitry Shestakov took his family to Ukraine, where they were granted refugee status by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Then, after another three years, on Tuesday 30 August, Dmitry, Marina and their two youngest daughters – Alexandra (20) and Vera (16) – landed on US soil. They will live in Miama, Florida. (Their eldest daughter, Maria, 22, is now married and has stayed in Ukraine with her husband.)

But challenges still lie ahead for the family, according to Sergey Rakhuba from Mission Eurasia, which hopes to raise \$10,000 for them to help their transition. He said the money will go towards rent, food, furniture, clothes and transportation.

"After nine years of hardships, the family is arriving with nothing – no money, no housing, and precious few possessions," Rakhuba said.

What is life like for Christians still in Uzbekistan?

Uzbekistan hit the world headlines this week, after long-standing President Islam Karimov was reported to have died. Some confusion still surrounds the situation. Karimov, who has been President since before the country's independence from Soviet rule in 1991, reportedly suffered a brain haemorrhage. However, his daughter has asked for the speculation surrounding his condition to end, while a government announcement on 28 August suggested he may recover after "a certain period of time". Now they say he is "critically ill". In March last year, Karimov was re-elected to a third term, even though the constitution limits presidents to two terms.

Uzbekistan is by far the most populous Central Asian country, with more than 30 million people – twice as many as the second-largest country in the region, Kazakhstan. It is generally considered to have the most restrictive laws in Central Asia. Sanctions on religious literature are particularly stringent. Religious books must be read in designated areas only, such as registered church buildings. Fines are hefty and regularly issued.

At No. 15, Uzbekistan is the highest-ranked Central Asian country on Open Doors' 2016 World Watch List, which ranks the countries in which it is most difficult to be a Christian. Karimov's regime has been accused of serious human rights abuses, including the systematic use of torture. Uzbekistan has been a "Country of Particular Concern" for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom since 2005.

Open Doors estimates there are around 210,000 Christians in Uzbekistan, but during the last decade not a single church has been able to register. Unregistered religious activity is outlawed, while even registered churches, such as the Full Gospel Church, face pressure from the authorities.

Uzbekistan is officially a secular state, although around 90% of the population is Muslim. Almost all of Uzbekistan's Christians are from ethnic minorities. Under Uzbek law, it is illegal to try to persuade someone to change their religion.

Rakhuba says there have been a "rising number of arrests, raids, imprisonments, and threats to religious freedom" across Central Asia.

"Many Christian families and pastors in Uzbekistan and Central Asia are risking everything – jobs, families, and even their very lives – to boldly preach ... in regions hostile to Christianity," he added.

In July, World Watch Monitor reported that the "paranoia" of Central Asian leaders over the threat of Islamism was also affecting Christians.

"To an even greater extent than its neighbours, Uzbekistan effectively whitewashes all distinctions of Islamic activity not government sanctioned as radical and terrorist," according to an Open Doors report written by consultant risk analyst Mark McNamee.

"The Karimov regime is particularly paranoid and security-minded due to the large potential for unrest on account of the comparative large size in Central Asia ... [its] greater ethnic diversity, and the independent development of jihad within its territory.

"Uzbekistan's Islamists in the 1990s saw in the Tajik Civil War an opportunity for jihad and participated in that war aligned with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, as they were powerless to struggle for Islam in their own country. In the aftermath, [they] rejuvenated themselves in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan, from whence sprang the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, both of which have officially sought the overthrow of the Karimov regime to be replaced by a caliphate. Both groups have effectively been extinguished in the region, with IMU regrouping in northern Afghanistan and the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region and most recently subsuming itself to IS."

Raids, prison, fines for home religious meetings

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (09.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bEShUK> - *After police raided a religious meeting in a home in Bukhara Region, four Sufi Muslims were imprisoned for four years each for participating in an "illegal" religious group. Eleven more were fined. Protestants have been tortured and fined for "illegal" literature in homes.*

Four members of a Sufi Muslim community were imprisoned for four years in Bukhara Region in June for religious meetings at home, as their community does not have state registration. Eleven more members were fined.

A Protestant in Urgench was fined in absentia in June, without being given a copy of the court verdict for weeks after the fine was handed down. The first he knew of the decision was when he was ordered to pay the fine. Police had tortured him after searching his home for religious literature (see below).

A Judge in Fergana fined a Protestant in June for having "illegal" religious literature in his home. He ordered eight Christian books to be confiscated. The Protestant had already spent sixteen days in prison to punish him for the same "offence". While in prison he was tortured. The Prosecutor's Office and Police dismissed all his complaints (see below).

Police in Navoi Region are seeking to have two Seventh-day Adventists punished for religious literature seized in a raid on the home of one of them. However, in July a court handed the case against the two back to Police for further investigation (see below).

Home religious meetings and literature "illegal"

Against its international human rights obligations, Uzbekistan bans all meetings for worship almost anywhere other than in state-registered communities and their registered premises. All Muslim communities must belong to the state-backed Muslim Board, a monopoly to which other faiths are not subject.

Uzbekistan also imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

When Muslims violate these harsh restrictions they often face imprisonment. Non-Muslims generally face short-term imprisonment of up to 15 days or fines. In January, a group of 30 Jehovah's Witnesses were punished in Bukhara Region for meeting for worship and possessing religious literature officials claimed was "illegal". All were fined and two were also sentenced to ten days' imprisonment. A Baptist in Urgench has been threatened with three years' imprisonment for possessing religious literature.

Torture "routine", says UN

Torture, or threats of this, is "routine" in Uzbekistan the United Nations (UN) Committee Against Torture has found.

Four-year prison terms, fines for home religious meetings

On 1 June Karakul District Criminal Court in Bukhara Region handed down four-year prison terms to four leaders of a Sufi Naqshbandi Muslim community, Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service told Forum 18 on 8 August, citing unnamed local people. Forum 18 has been unable to find out the names of the four.

The four Sufi leaders were convicted under Criminal Code Article 216. This punishes "Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities" with a fine of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or imprisonment of up to five years.

The four leaders were among 15 Sufis arrested in Karakul District, 60 kms (35 miles) south-west of Bukhara close to the border with Turkmenistan. The arrests followed a police raid on a home where a community was performing the zikr, a devotional practice of reciting sacred phrases, Radio Free Europe noted.

The same court on 16 July fined eleven other members of the same community up to 4,000,000 Soms (11,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,200 Euros or 1,300 US Dollars at the highly inflated official exchange rate) each for illegally meeting in homes under the same charges.

The authorities have previously been regarded as being more tolerant of Sufi Islam, apparently regarding it as a counterbalance to what they see as more dangerous forms of Islam.

The assistant (who refused to give his name) of Karakul District Court's Chair refused to comment on the imprisonments and fines handed down to the 15 Sufis. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other court official for comments.

When Forum 18 insisted and asked why Uzbekistan, which earlier celebrated the Sufi Naqshbandi order and took pride that it was home to the order, changed its attitude and began prosecuting members of the community, the official would only respond: "We cannot comment on it, you better ask Bukhara Regional [Criminal] Court. The case is with them."

Asked why Sufi believers are being prosecuted now, Ikrom Muslimov, Chair of Bukhara Regional Court, told Forum 18 on 8 August: "I do not know the details, the case has not reached me yet." He declined to talk to Forum 18 further, referring it to the Foreign Ministry. "Please, send your questions through the Foreign Ministry in writing," he said. He did not explain why the Foreign Ministry should be involved.

Fined in absentia

Elsewhere Urgench City Criminal Court in north-western Khorosm Region on 16 June fined Protestant Christian Jurabek Vapayev seven times the minimum monthly wage, 911,680 Soms, local Protestants who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 July.

The hearing took place in Vapayev's absence and a copy of the decision was not immediately provided to him, the Protestants lamented to Forum 18. So as of early July, weeks after the court decision, he did not know what charges he had been punished under.

"He found out about the penalty only when Court officials handed him a piece of paper which indicated that, according to the Urgench Court decision, he must pay the mentioned sum to a branch of Halq [People's] Bank, without any other details," the Protestants added.

Vapayev is preparing to appeal against the punishment, the Protestants said. However, the Court needs to correct its failure to issue the written verdict. According to the provisions of Administrative Code Article 311, courts must provide a defendant with a copy of a decision within three days. Under Article 316 the defendant then has 10 days from receiving the decision to lodge an appeal. The refusal to issue a written decision could deprive Vapayev of the possibility to lodge an appeal.

Urgench City Court officials, including its Chancellery officials, (who declined to give their names) refused to talk to Forum 18 on 5 July.

Home raided, eight hours' questioning and torture

Trouble for Vapayev began on the morning of 17 May when Anti-Terrorism Police Officers Major Shukhrat Masharipov, Captain Sherzod Masharipov, Lieutenant Shavkat Bekjanov and Inspector Murod Atayev raided his home in Urgench. "When the police found no religious literature they confiscated his personal notebooks with notes about his faith and quotes from the Bible as well as his mobile phone," Protestants complained to Forum 18.

The Police officers then took Vapayev to Urgench City Police Station, where they questioned him for eight hours. The Protestants complained that the officers "beat him there, did not give him food or water, refused to let him use the toilet, and demanded that he sign the statement against him prepared by the police." However, Vapayev refused to do so. He was released from the Police Station the same day.

Major Masharipov and Police Investigator Bekjanov often raid the homes of individuals in Khorosm, and harass and torture them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. In May they also raided two Baptists and interrogated them for six hours.

Asked why Vapayev was raided and tortured, Captain Masharipov was unable to answer. "I only took part in the search of his home because Major Masharipov asked us," he told Forum 18 on 5 July. "Ask the Major," he retorted when asked why they continued to interrogate Vapayev for eight hours when they did not find any religious materials in his home. He then put the phone down.

Despite Forum 18's repeated calls, Major Masharipov and Lieutenant Bekjanov did not answer their phones between 5 July and 8 August.

Punished twice for same "offence"

Meanwhile Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana City Criminal Court in eastern Fergana Region on 27 June found Latipzhon Mamajanov guilty in his absence of violating Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). The Judge fined him 20 times the minimum monthly wage or 2,604,800 Soms.

With the same decision, the Judge ordered the confiscation of eight Christian books Police had seized from Mamajanov.

"It's absurd," Mamajanov's fellow-believers, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 1 August. "He had already been punished with sixteen days' imprisonment for the same event."

The same Judge Sotivoldiyev on 12 March had handed down a fifteen-day prison term to Mamajanov after Police raided his home and confiscated religious materials from him. However, Mamajanov was released from prison, where he was tortured, only after sixteen days.

Judge Sotivoldiyev refused to talk to Forum 18. Asked through his Secretary why Mamajanov was punished twice for the same alleged violation, he asked Forum 18: "Why should we know that?" The Secretary (who did not give her name) then put the phone down.

Prosecutor's Office and Police dismiss complaints

First Deputy Prosecutor of Fergana Region Sirojiddin Eshkuvatov, in a 29 June letter, rejected Mamajanov's complaint against Police violations during the March raid on his home, when he and his brother as well as a fellow-believer were detained. Prosecutor Eshkuvatov added in the same letter that, on 23 May, the Prosecutor's Office had rejected Mamajanov's demand to open a criminal case against the Police officers involved "in connection with the absence in their actions of elements of a crime".

Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office officials (who would not give their names) on 8 August refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Eshkuvatov or to discuss Mamajanov's complaint.

In a 7 May letter signed by Otabek Satimboyev, Chief of the Personnel Section, Fergana Regional Police Department also rejected Mamajanov's complaint. Satimboyev claimed that his "complaint was thoroughly studied, and the facts indicated in it could not be corroborated".

Officials of the Personnel Section on 8 August refused to put Forum 18 through to Satimboyev or discuss the case with Forum 18.

Raid, religious literature seized, prosecution to follow?

In western Navoi Region, Novbahor District Police on 17 July handed an administrative case against two local Seventh-day Adventists to Navoi City Criminal Court. The two - Sergei Alekseyev and Saidat Abdurakhimova - were accused of violating Administrative Code Article 184-2. However, the Court referred it back to the Police for further investigation, local believers who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 August.

Trouble began for the two Adventists on 29 May. Early in the evening, Captain Alisher Atayev, Navoi Region's Novbahor District anti-terrorism Police Officer, led a raid on Alekseyev's home, local believers complained to Forum 18. Captain Atayev was accompanied by the local Police Officer Nodir Bazarov as well as Alisher (last name not given), Chair of the mahalla committee (local residential administration). The officials "made an unauthorised search in the flat and seized his Christian books".

Captain Atayev then opened an administrative case against Alekseyev and Abdurakhimova. Both are members of a state-registered Adventist congregation.

Officer Atayev confirmed the raid to Forum 18 on 8 August, but said he could not say over the phone why Police raided Alekseyev's flat and why they did so without a search warrant. "You need to come to our Police Station if you want to find out why," was his response. He then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Meals and under-18s in mosques banned

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (12.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29vZ83K> - Uzbekistan this Ramadan banned shared public Muslim iftar meals in Tashkent. Human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov commented "the main reason .. is because this is a public expression of their [Muslims'] faith". The authorities also continued nationwide to ban people under 18 attending mosques.

Uzbekistan banned shared Muslim iftar (breaking of fast) meals in public in the capital Tashkent during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Forum 18 has learned. The authorities also continued to ban people under 18 from attending mosques.

In Tashkent schoolteachers and police were placed at the entrances of mosques to stop people under 18 entering, and in Andijan [Andijon] Region the local Education Department instructed parents to sign letters that they would not (among other things) allow their children to attend mosque prayers throughout the summer. One Andijan mosque placed a sign outside it banning children and mentally-ill children from entering. A local education official told Forum 18 that the reason for the ban was that "children can be misled in mosques", but would not answer when asked if this was an official opinion or why she thought state-controlled imams would mislead people (see below).

Muslim Board officials in Andijan, Samarkand [Samarqand], Bukhara [Bukhoro], Navoi [Navoiy], Namangan and several other regions either refused to answer questions on the issues, or did not answer their phones on 4 and 5 July. The Religious Affairs Committee also refused to discuss the issues with Forum 18 on 5 July.

The bans also appear to have covered the three-day Ramazon hayit (Eid al-fitr) festival, which marks the end of the month of Ramadan. The festival started this year in Uzbekistan from the evening of 5 July, and is marked with prayers and meals. Muslims

are forbidden to fast during the festival, making meals particularly important for religious reasons.

Uzbekistan normally imposes even stricter than usual controls on Islamic communities during Ramadan, for example bans on prayers by groups in private homes and people eating the daily Iftar meals at the end of each fast in restaurants. (Restaurant iftar meals normally only take place in Tashkent.) Surveillance of people attending mosques is also stricter than usual.

Jail sentences confirmed

Uzbekistan also marked the end of Ramadan by Tashkent Regional Court on 5 July confirming five-year prison sentences given to two Muslim prisoners of conscience, jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

The two cousins, Jonibek Turdiboyev and Mansurkhon Akhmedov, were jailed on 29 May for allegedly possessing an Islamic sermon on a music CD, and a third Muslim was jailed for seven years after Russian extradition for social media sermons. They were tortured and tried unfairly, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police helping choose one lawyer.

"No matter how much evidence of their innocence, or of the authorities' violation of criminal procedures, we gave to the Court, the Judge did not pay attention," human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov, who was part of the legal defence team, complained to Forum 18 on 8 July. "We felt as though we were beating the air. The hearing was a farce."

Rustamov told Forum 18 that "we will make a cassation appeal to the Regional Court as soon as we get the copy of the appeal verdict."

Tashkent bans public iftar meals

Tashkent City Administration banned the holding of public iftar meals in the capital's mosques and restaurants. Deputy Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur of the state-controlled Muslim Board told Forum 18 on 4 July that "this was done on the initiative of the Muslim Board because mosques and restaurants are not a place for it". He added that "the breaking of fast should not become a feast but it should be done modestly in homes with one's own family."

Tashkent is normally the only place in which restaurant iftar meals have been allowed in some years.

Muslims from Tashkent told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) on 14 June that mosques they visited did not offer public iftar meals. One Muslim commented though that "free water, dates, samsa [an Uzbek meat pie snack], and other light dishes were offered."

Asked by Forum 18 why Muslims cannot have public iftar meals in mosques or restaurants, Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur did not answer.

Agzom Abrorov, who works for Shukhrat Turdikulov (Deputy Head of Tashkent Administration overseeing religious issues), said he cannot answer, when Forum 18 asked on 5 July why iftar meals were banned in mosques and restaurants. Abrorov later said that "no one can answer and Turdikulov is not available."

Human rights defender Rustamov commented that "the main reason the authorities do not want Muslims to gather in restaurants for shared meals is because this is a public expression of their faith".

People under 18 banned from mosques

Uzbekistan also continued its ban on people under 18 attending mosques, even during Ramadan and the summer holidays. The country routinely pressures belief communities, parents and guardians not to allow children or young people to attend meetings for worship and other activities – even though this is not illegal, and even for belief communities which have state permission to exist.

It is illegal for people to exercise freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission.

Human rights defender Rustamov told Forum 18 that "throughout Ramadan in Tashkent placed police and teachers from various schools at the entrances of mosques, to make sure that no schoolchildren attended mosques." He complained that "this is a violation of the rights of Muslims, especially as children from the age of 12 must begin receiving religious education according to Muslim tradition."

Teachers and doctors have previously been used to help police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers".

The no under-18s in mosques ban was also enforced outside Tashkent. Parents in mid-May shared with RFE/RL a letter from the Andijan Regional Administration's Education Department which obliged parents to "watch their children so that they do not join religious movements, nor attend mosques for prayers during the summer holidays." The letter also stated that parents must not let their children attend internet clubs or go out after 6 pm without adult supervision.

Parents were ordered to sign and return the letter, which warned that if the demands are not followed parents will be "punished according to the law".

RFE/RL also published a photograph of a sign on one Andijan mosque banning children and mentally ill persons from attending it.

The authorities have previously bullied and harassed (including in schools) school-age pupils who attend places of worship, including mosques and Christian churches.

Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur, asked why people under 18 cannot attend mosques, replied that "you need to ask the state authorities". He also said that "the Muslim Board is not against children attending mosque but the ban comes from the state, which is secular. Children can receive a good upbringing by attending mosques."

Mansur said that the sign outside an Andijan mosque "was the initiative of the local Imam not the Muslim Board."

"Children can be misled in mosques"

Asked by Forum 18 on 5 July why people under 18 were banned from attending mosques, Lyudmila (who would not give her last name) of Andijan Regional Education Department replied: "You must be aware of what is going on around the world with the jihadists. Children can be misled in mosques."

Asked if this was the official opinion of the Education Department, and why she thought imams in the state-controlled mosques might mislead children, she would not answer. She then declined to talk more to Forum 18.

Gulhayo Omonova, Chief of the Education Department's Section on ethics and education issues, similarly could not explain the ban. "I don't know," she told Forum 18 on 5 July. Told that a colleague of hers from the Department told Forum 18 that "children can be misled in mosques", and asked if this was the Department's official opinion, she repeated "I don't know". She then declined to talk more to Forum 18.

When Forum 18 asked Saidali Yusupov, Advisor to the national Education Minister on religious issues, why his Andijan Education Department sent letters to parents, he first introduced himself as Yusupov, but then denied he was Yusupov who he claimed was "not available". He then put the phone down.

Under-18s from non-Muslim communities

During Ramadan the authorities do not appear to have concentrated their usual hostile attention on people under 18 attending non-Muslim communities.

"There are no problems with children attending worship services or being taught in the Church," Archpriest Sergey Statsenko of the Education Department of the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 8 July. Statsenko has previously defended the government on state television while attacking "sects".

"Children come to mass without any problems, and we teach them throughout the whole year," Roman Catholic Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 8 July. Similarly, a Baptist from the registered Baptist Union, who asked to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 8 July that "Baptists have not had problems with having children in their worship services recently."

Council of Churches Baptists have also not recently in 2016 had problems specifically because of people under 18 being at meetings for worship. (These churches do not seek state registration in the countries they exist in.) "The authorities on occasion ask us during raids why people under 18 are being taught religion, but they mainly punish us because we are not state registered," they told Forum 18 on 8 July.

After one such raid, when police detained those present, police tortured nursing infant children by denying them food to force their parents to write statements.

Pressures against children and young people

Uzbekistan already pressures belief communities, parents and guardians not to allow children or young people to attend meetings for worship and other activities – even though this is not illegal, and even for belief communities which have state permission to exist. It is illegal for people to exercise freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission. Physical torture has also been inflicted by police on children.

Such pressure against children and young people includes:

- forcing teachers and doctors to help police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers", the use of Anti-Terrorism Police in raids on Protestant and Jehovah's Witness meetings for worship when children are present, and state-sponsored media attacks on children being present for worship meetings;
- the authorities bullying and harassing (including in schools) school-age pupils who attend places of worship including mosques and Christian churches.

In cities such as Angren the authorities have held meetings of local religious communities to warn them not to be involved in unspecified "proselytism" and "missionary activity", or

to allow children and young people to take part in meetings for worship. Communities were also ordered to give the authorities lists of their members.

Two weeks before that meeting, police raided the local Baptist church's Sunday morning meeting for worship. Two teenage schoolgirls present were later called to a police station and pressured to write statements against the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Gavrilov, and to stop attending the Church.

Criminal Code harshened

The Criminal Code has recently been harshened to increase these pressures against children and young people, as well as their parents or guardians. Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") has been harshened to increase this pressure against children and young people exercising freedom of religion or belief.

The previous Article 244-2 punishment was between 5 and 15 years in jail. But from 26 April 2016 a new Part 2 (b) punishes individuals with imprisonment for between 15 and 20 years, if they are found to have involved people under the age of 16 in "illegal" religious organisations.

Article 244-2 is normally only used against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Three-year imprisonment for religious literature?

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (28.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bi0aRJ> - Stanislav Kim could be jailed for up to three years if convicted of having "illegal" religious literature in his home in Urgench. In Bukhara, two Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed for ten days and, with 28 others, fined for "illegal" literature and worship meeting.

Police in Urgench [Urganch] in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region appear about to hand to court a criminal case against a local Baptist to punish him for "illegal possession" of religious literature in his home. Stanislav Kim could face up to three years' imprisonment if convicted. The Investigator who prepared the indictment refused to tell Forum 18 if Nikolai Serin, another Baptist questioned as a witness in the case, also faces prosecution. Courts routinely punish people for "illegal" religious literature as well as holding meetings for worship.

Khorezm authorities also raided a Baptist worship meeting in February. In late March the host and her non-believing husband were fined for possessing "illegal" literature in their home when the meeting was raided.

Meanwhile in the southern Bukhara Region on 27 January, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses were punished for meeting for worship and possessing religious literature officials claimed was "illegal". They received fines totalling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage or 136,752,000 Soms (390,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 47,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Two of the Jehovah's Witnesses - Andrei and Yelena Yu - were fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage each and given 10-day jail terms for exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Against its international human rights obligations, Uzbekistan imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban

on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

Imprisonment for religious literature?

On 27 June Investigator Lieutenant Sarvar Artykov of Urgench City Police in Khorezm Region prepared and signed the indictment (seen by Forum 18) against local Baptist Stanislav Kim. He is accused of "illegal possession" of Christian literature under Criminal Code Article 244-3.

Article 244-3 punishes "Illegal production, storage, import into the territory of Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials, committed after enforcement of an administrative penalty for a similar violation" with a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labour of up to three years.

"The Investigator warned us that Stanislav might be fined or even jailed for up to three years," Nikolai Serin, Kim's fellow-Baptist from Navoi Region, told Forum 18 on 27 June. Police told Serin and Kim that Urgench City Court will hear the case in up to fifteen days (by about 10 July), Serin added.

Both Kim and Serin are members of separate Council of Churches Baptist congregations. Council of Churches Baptist churches do not – as Uzbekistan against its human rights obligations requires – seek state permission to exist.

Urgench Police questioned Serin on 26 June as a witness in the case, he noted. On 19 June Police in Navoi had already raided his home there and confiscated his Christian books. Navoi Police told him that a case had been opened against him under Administrative Code Article 184-2, which punishes "Illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials" with a fine for individuals of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage, as well as confiscation of the materials and any equipment used to produce them.

"We've done nothing criminal, but only exercised our Constitutional rights which allow us peacefully to practice our faith, which does no harm to anyone," Serin insisted to Forum 18. He said that when he told Investigator Artykov, who is leading the case, that he refuses to be a witness, the Investigator warned him that "I also may be punished with up to three years' imprisonment unless I cooperate with the Police."

Serin did not sign any Police reports or statements prepared by Urgench Police during questioning either on 17 May or 26 June, he told Forum 18.

"Extremist"?

Investigator Artykov argues in the 27 June indictment that the materials found in Kim's home "contain ideas of converting believers of one confession to another, which is against Article 5, Part 3 of the Religion Law". He concludes therefore that Kim "stored illegal religious materials in his private flat".

The indictment says that among the items officers seized from Kim was a Russian-language book "To Mecca", which "propagates the Protestant religion". The book is a "testimony of a former [non-Uzbek] Muslim man who became a Christian", Serin told Forum 18. He confirmed that Kim had a copy.

The "expert analysis" by the government's Religious Affairs Committee says that the book "does not contain ideas against Uzbekistan's Constitutional order, or of an extremist

or separatist nature". But it claims that the book "can be used for missionary purposes", Serin noted.

Arslan Ruzimov, Chief of Khorezm Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department, adamantly defended the charges against Kim. Asked on 28 June why the authorities want to imprison him, he told Forum 18 from Urgench: "The religious expert analysis found the materials confiscated from Kim to be extremist."

Told that the confiscated literature consisted of Christian magazines, children's stories, song-books and Kim's personal notes, and asked what specifically is "extremist" in those materials, Ruzimov could not answer. "They have a lawyer, they can ask him to defend them," he retorted. Asked why Serin was pressured to be a witness against Kim, his co-believer, he did not answer. He then declined to talk to Forum 18.

Investigator Artykov also used a July 2001 conviction in a non-religious criminal case to justify the unrelated new case. Kim was sentenced that year to 20 years' imprisonment as an alleged accomplice in an intentional killing. Artykov argues that although Kim was freed from his sentence, "he continued violating the Law".

Serin told Forum 18 that Kim was released from prison in 2009, and that "he became a believer while in prison." He said that "it looks like the authorities want to imprison him again, which is why they bring up his criminal conviction from the past in the indictment."

Investigator Artykov told Forum 18 on 28 June that the case against Kim has not yet been handed to the Court, but refused to answer Forum 18's other questions. Asked whether any charges were brought against Serin, as well as why a criminal case was opened against Kim simply for having Christian books and materials in his home, Artykov replied: "If you want to know the answers then send your representative to our office. I will not answer your questions over the phone." Artykov also did not say when the Police will refer the case to the Court.

Why criminal charges?

The indictment explains that police opened a criminal case against Kim because this is the second case against him within one year for possessing "illegal" religious literature.

Urgench City Criminal Court fined Kim ten times the minimum monthly wage, 1,184,000 Soms, on 8 August 2015 under Administrative Code Article 184-2, according to the June 2016 indictment. The Court ordered part of the Christian literature confiscated from him to be destroyed and the rest to be handed over to the Khorezm Department of the state-backed Muslim Board.

The fine followed a 20 July 2015 raid on Kim's home.

Secret police and anti-terrorism police raid and confiscations

The latest trouble began for Kim on 17 May, when Major Shukhrat Masharipov of Urgench Anti-Terrorism Police and two unidentified officers raided his home in the city, Serin told Forum 18. The indictment indicates that the two officers represented the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The officers pretended to be conducting a passport inspection.

Without showing a search warrant, officers confiscated Christian literature, including the book "To Mecca", one copy each of "Herald of Truth" magazine, two Baptist song books ("Hold on to Christ" and "Youth for Christ"), a book of Christian children's stories, and several notebooks with personal notes.

Serin told Forum 18 that he was present during the Police raid on Kim's home, since he happened to be visiting him that day.

Six hour interrogation

Officer Masharipov and the other officers took Kim's and Serin's passports and left, demanding that the two appear at Urgench Police Station the next morning.

On 18 May, Major Masharipov and Police Investigator Shavkat Bekjanov questioned the two Baptists for six hours, Serin told Forum 18. "They suggested that we write statements but we refused." The Police told the Baptists that as Kim had been found for the second time "illegally possessing" Christian literature in his home, this time he may be jailed. The two were released from the Police Station that evening.

February Khorezm raid and fines

On 17 February in Gullanbog, in Yangiaryk District of Khorezm Region, two plain-clothes Anti-Terrorism Police officers and the local ordinary police officer raided the home of Oybek and Gulnara Rahimov as 15 Council of Churches Baptists were meeting for worship.

"When the local police officer saw we were worshipping, he called for a police squad," Baptists told Forum 18 on 15 April. Police then began filming those present and took down their names. Police also confiscated a Bible, a children's Bible, one other Christian book and two Baptist song-books.

All the meeting participants were taken to Yangiaryk District Police Station, where they were questioned for three hours.

Oybek Rahimov is not a Baptist and was not at home during the raid. But that did not stop Judge Yerpolat Berdiyev, Chair of Bogot District Criminal Court, on 22 March fining both wife and husband 10 times the minimum monthly wage each. Baptists have particularly expressed outrage at the fine imposed on Oybek.

Judge Berdiyev also ordered the destruction of Christian literature confiscated from the Rahimovs' home. Courts frequently order that such confiscated religious literature be destroyed.

Asked why the Baptists were raided, Bogot District Police on 8 June referred Forum 18 to Anti-Terrorism Police officer Dilshot Fayzullayev. However, asked the same day why officers conducted the raid, fines and confiscations, he refused to answer.

Neither Bogot District Court, nor Judge Berdiyev, answered their phones on 9 June.

Two short-term prisoners of conscience, 30 large fines

Meanwhile, in Kogon in Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region on 27 January, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses received fines totalling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage or 136,752,000 Soms (390,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 47,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Two of the Jehovah's Witnesses - Andrei and Yelena Yu - were fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage each and given 10-day jail terms for exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

The fines and jailing of the two prisoners of conscience followed an early January raid by Kogon Anti-Terrorism Police and the ordinary police on the home of Aziz Pulatov. Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting together for worship, they told Forum 18 on 8 June.

Numon Tukhtayev, Deputy Head of Kogon Anti-Terrorism Police, refused on 8 June to explain why the raid took place. The same day the ordinary police similarly refused to explain their actions.

Judge Zarif Sherov, Chair of Kogon Criminal Court, found the accused guilty under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Part 1 ("Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the unauthorised organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship").

Aziz Pulatov and Fazliddin Tukhtayev were fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage each; Akpar Pulatov, Shahzoda Pulatova, Mukaddas Rakhmatova, Zuhra Tashayeva, and Malyuda Kuldasheva were fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage each; Shahnoz Gulomova, Shahzoda Mavlyanova, Mukhabbatkhon Mirzayeva, Mokhidil Zairova, Gulnora Norova, Dilfuza Kobilova, Orom Khaydarova, Soliya Niyazova, Mahliyo Zhurayeva, Ibodillo Zhurayev, Gulchehra Ibadova, Shoista Mamedova, Shahin Norov, Zarina Kosimova, Munavvar Mardonova, Azamzhon Ismatilloev, Farida Amonova, and Zarina Amonova were fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage each; and Gulbahor Mavlonova, Nilufar Ibrohimova, and Mizhgona Ismatillayeva were fined 5 times the minimum monthly wage each.

Judge Sherov denied that he had jailed prisoners of conscience Andrei and Yelena Yu. "I do not know about the jailing," he claimed to Forum 18 on 9 June.

However, the Judge admitted that he had imposed fines totalling 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage. Asked why he did this to people exercising their freedom of religion and belief, Sherov stated: "I explained to them during the hearing that the fines were given based on the existing law."

Asked about the restrictions the Religion Law, Administrative and Criminal Codes put on the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, the Judge replied: "I cannot comment on that". He then said "let them appeal if they do not agree with our decision" before declining to talk further to Forum 18.

Harshened Criminal and Administrative Code punishments

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (15.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bfhrfz> - Uzbekistan has harshened its Administrative and Criminal Codes' restrictions and punishments for exercising the freedoms of religion and belief, and expression. Human rights defenders and religious believers think the changes target Muslims exercising these fundamental human rights, and give more possibilities to prosecute non-Muslims.

Uzbekistan has harshened its Criminal Codes' previously existing restrictions and punishments against people exercising freedom of religion and belief and related fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression. Criminal Code Articles 244-1 and 244-2 (mainly used against Muslims exercising freedom of religion and belief) have been harshened to allow: criminal prosecutions without a previous Administrative Code

prosecution; increased jail terms, including between 15 and 20 years jail for involving people under 16 in "illegal" religious organisations; a ban on "production, storage or dissemination of the ideas or symbols of religious extremist or terrorist organisations"; and increased mass media, telecommunications and internet restrictions. Code of Administrative Offences deportation possibilities for exercising freedom of religion and belief have also been extended. Human rights defenders, Muslim and non-Muslim believers think the changes target Muslims exercising the freedoms of religion and belief, and of expression, and give more possibilities to prosecute non-Muslims.

Harshened Criminal and Administrative Code restrictions and punishments

Uzbekistan has harshened its Administrative and Criminal Codes' previously existing restrictions and punishments against people exercising freedom of religion and belief and related fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression. President Islam Karimov signed the changes into law on 25 April, and they came into force the next day.

The amendments were part of a Law on Additions and Amendments to Various Legal Acts, which was officially published on 26 April in the Uzbek-language newspaper "Halk Suzi" (People's Word) and the Russian-language paper "Narodnoe Slovo".

Criminal Code Article 244-1

Criminal Code Article 244-1 has been given a new title: "Production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order". It has also been harshened to allow for criminal prosecution without, as previously, a previous prosecution and punishment under the Code of Administrative Offences. Its possible punishments have been increased to imprisonment of between 5 and 8 years, instead of the previous up to 5 years' jail or a fine of between 300 and 400 times the minimum monthly wage.

The minimum monthly wage is currently 130,240 Soms (about 370 Norwegian Kroner, 40 Euros, or 45 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Article 244-1 already punishes: "Production, storage or dissemination of materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion for purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and public order".

The broadly phrased Article 244-1, which lacks clear definitions of the "crimes" it forbids, is already used to prosecute and jail Muslims as prisoners of conscience for exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

However, the most recent changes have broadened Article 244-1 further by replacing the requirement for there to be a first conviction under the Administrative Code with the phrase: "as well as the production, storage or dissemination of the ideas or symbols of religious extremist or terrorist organisations". The term "religious extremist or terrorist organisations" is not clearly defined.

Part 1 of the Article punishes "production and storage", Part 2 punishes "dissemination". Part 3 (a) punishes this "crime" with prior planning or by groups of individuals, Part 3 (b) punishes it by officials, and Part 3 (c) punishes this "with financial or other material aid from religious organisations, as well as foreign states, organisations, and citizens".

Uzbekistan already punishes people for possessing religious material in electronic form. At least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for having the Koran and

sermons in their mobile phones. Tightening this restriction, a new Part 3 (d) bans the "criminal" activities in Article 244-1 "using the mass media or telecommunication networks, as well as the world wide web".

Against its international human rights obligations, Uzbekistan imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

Criminal Code Article 244-1 is normally used only against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Criminal Code Article 244-2

Uzbekistan already pressures belief communities, parents and guardians not to allow children or young people to attend meetings for worship and other activities – even though this is not illegal, and even for belief communities which have state permission to exist. It is illegal for people to exercise freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission.

Such pressure includes the use of Anti-Terrorism Police in raids on religious meetings when children are present.

Criminal Code Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") has been harshened to increase this pressure against children and young people exercising freedom of religion or belief. The previous Article 244-2 punishment was between 5 and 15 years in jail. But from 26 April a new Part 2 (b) punishes individuals with imprisonment for between 15 and 20 years, if they are found to have involved people under the age of 16 in "illegal" religious organisations.

Uzbekistan already subjects people exercising freedom of religion and belief to surveillance and attempts to recruit informers among belief communities. Part 3 of Article 244-2 allows such informers to be released from punishments under the Article "if they of their own free will inform the authorities of the existence of a banned organisation and help solve the crime".

Criminal Code Article 244-2 is normally only used against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Deportation

If either foreigners or stateless persons are convicted under the Administrative Code of exercising their freedom of religion and belief, the Code's Article 291 ("Deportation of foreign or stateless persons") has now been altered to allow them to be deported for a first "offence". Such persons are also barred from re-entering the country for between 1 and 3 years. Many articles of the Administrative Code ban specific aspects of exercising freedom of religion and belief.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many people became citizens of a formerly Soviet state they had never lived in and did not have citizenship of the state where they actually lived. Sometimes expelled individuals are formally deported, with "deported" stamped on their passports. On other occasions they have been pressured to leave with no record that they have been deported.

Uzbekistan has frequently: expelled local residents who happen to be foreign citizens to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief; expelled foreign visitors to the country to punish them for visiting local religious communities or conducting religious activity during their visit; and prevented Uzbek citizens who have been "legally" punished for exercising their religious freedom from leaving the country.

Changes to target Muslims exercising freedoms of religion and belief, and expression?

The Criminal Code changes "mainly affect Muslims", a human rights defender in Uzbekistan, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 7 June. They noted the use of Articles 244-1 and 244-2 to give long jail terms to Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief and found with "illegal" religious literature.

Another human rights defender, Shukhrat Rustamov, commented to Forum 18 on 7 June that the latest changes – as well as the existing Religion Law, Criminal and Administrative Codes – are against the Constitution. He noted that, with the changes, "the authorities want to impose a total blockade of information for religious believers". Summarising the reason for censorship and raids targeting religious texts, a state news agency in March published an article stating that the government aimed to "isolate the population".

Human rights defender Rustamov noted that before the changes "it was already difficult to receive or give information on faith or religious matters". In particular, Rustamov observed that even those who search online for religious information the authorities deem "extremist" will be punished under the changes.

Raids, large fines and the confiscation of "illegal" religious literature continue against people of all faiths. These frequently involve the authorities breaking published laws, but no officials are known to have been held to account for this. Asked in early June whether people have freedom of religion and belief, a Judge told Forum 18 "maybe".

A local Christian leader, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 7 June that "the authorities usually fine or jail for short periods of time Christians and people from other non-Muslim communities". But in the light of the April legal changes, "there are no guarantees that we will not in future also receive long jail terms, or that our guests may not be deported".

Refusals to explain

Officials have refused to explain the reason or reasons for the harshening of laws and punishments against people exercising freedom of religion and belief. Begzot Kadyrov (Chief Specialist of the Religious Affairs Committee), Tulkin Abdusattarov (Deputy Chair of the Parliament's Committee on Legislation and Judicial-Legal issues), and Makhmud Istamov of the Presidential Administration all refused to explain the increased restrictions to Forum 18 on 9 June.

Harshened Criminal Code used to jail prisoners of conscience

On 25 May, 30-year old Jonibek Turdiboyev and 29-year old Mansurkhon Akhmedov were both jailed for five years under the new Part 1 of Criminal Code Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations"). The only evidence brought by the prosecution consisted of statements from an existing prisoner and a claim that the authorities had found a Muslim sermon under music on an MP3 audio disc. Relatives and human rights defenders insist

that the two prisoners of conscience are "guilty" only of being devout Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

Large fines for "illegal" religious literature

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (07.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bi2d3t> - Uzbekistan continues raids, large fines and confiscation of "illegal" religious literature, at least 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses being fined up to 60 times the minimum monthly salary. Asked whether people have freedom of religion and belief, a Judge told Forum 18 "maybe".

Uzbekistan continues to raid homes and confiscate "illegal" religious literature. Known cases between January and May resulted in 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses being fined up to 60 times the minimum monthly salary each. Anti-Terrorism Police with ordinary police often conduct illegal searches of homes without a search warrant, as happened when police raided Council of Churches Baptist Stanislav Kim's home. Other known cases have involved Jehovah's Witnesses being stopped and searched as they left Fergana, and the possible use of a police agent provocateur to entrap two Urgench female Jehovah's Witnesses as they shared their beliefs and literature with a woman in a flat. On 23 May Judge Khozhahmet Asanov upheld fines for illegal religious literature on 14 Protestants who met to mark International Woman's Day, the fines totalling 350 times the minimum monthly wage. "Why should we pay such huge fines, which none of us can afford, for just meeting with our friends?" a Protestant asked. Forum 18 asked the Judge whether people in Uzbekistan can exercise freedom of religion and belief. He replied "maybe" before putting the phone down.

Recent known cases

Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes and confiscate religious literature, recent known cases having resulted in charges under the Code of Administrative Offences Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). In these cases, at least 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses have each been fined sums of up to 60 times the minimum monthly salary (see below).

Raids and confiscations are directed against people of all faiths, including Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. Uzbekistan punishes people for possessing religious material in both paper and electronic form. At least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for having the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones.

As well as fines and jail sentences, the authorities use torture - including rape threats - against people with religious literature.

Human rights obligations ignored

Against its international human rights obligations, Uzbekistan imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

In July 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the frequent raids, as well as - among other things - religious censorship, torture and fines to

punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. It called on Uzbekistan to "guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief".

However, on 25 April 2016 President Islam Karimov signed into law changes to the Administrative and Criminal Codes. The changes entered into force the following day and punish those who publish, disseminate, broadcast materials allegedly "extremist" religious materials with prison terms of between five and eight years.

Urgench raid

On 17 May three officers of Urgench [Urganch] Anti-Terrorism Police in the north-western Khorezm Region, led by Major Shukhrat Masharipov, raided Stanislav Kim's home. Without a search warrant they illegally confiscated a "Herald of Truth" Baptist magazine, two Christian song books, a children's story book, and five notebooks with Kim's personal notes, local Council of Churches told Forum 18 on 1 June. Police also took the passports of Kim and Nikolai Serin, a Baptist visiting from the capital Tashkent. They ordered the two Baptists to come to Urgench Police Station at 09.00 the next morning.

The next day Investigator Shavkat Bekjanov and Major Masharipov questioned the two Baptists for six hours. Both officers have a record of violating freedom of religion and belief. Police opened a case against Kim under Administrative Code Article 184-2 and pressured the two Baptists to write statements incriminating themselves, but both refused. The two then were released on the same day.

Apart from the illegal confiscation of the books and other personal property, no other known punishments have yet been imposed.

Checkpoint search

Among the many other known 2016 literature confiscations, on 13 February Jehovah's Witnesses Stanislav Ten and Valizhon Rahimov were stopped as they left Fergana [Farghona]. They were taken to Fergana Police Station and searched. Without giving any reasons, officers confiscated Ten's internal passport, mobile phone, tablet device (all three of which were returned on 23 February), as well as his computer's hard disc.

On 5 April Ten and Rahimov were fined 30 times the minimum monthly salary and 20 times the minimum monthly salary respectively. Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana City Criminal Court imposed the fines under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Fergana Police and the local Anti-Terrorism Police both refused to explain to Forum 18 on 2 June why the two Jehovah's Witnesses were stopped and charged. One officer, Akhmedov (who refused to give his full name), put the phone down as soon as these questions were asked.

Court officials, including the Judge's Secretary Liliya (who refused to give her last name), refused to explain to Forum 18 on 2 June why the two Jehovah's Witnesses were given such large fines.

Police agent provocateur?

On 4 January, Samarkand District Police arrested Jehovah's Witnesses Zarema Ilfanova and Gulsara Hassanova in the flat of a woman who had invited the two to share their faith with her. Police released the two Jehovah's Witnesses after several hours on the same day, without telling them why they had been arrested. Local Jehovah's Witnesses

think that the woman who lives in the flat may have invited the two Jehovah's Witnesses to her home on police instructions.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police in particular carries out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities, as well as seeking to recruit informers.

On 25 January Samarkand City Criminal Court fined the two women for a religious literature "offence" under Administrative Code Article 184-2. Ilfanova was fined 12 times the minimum monthly salary and Hassanova 10 times.

Raids two days running

On 5 January in Chirchik in Tashkent Region, Anti-Terrorism Police officer Yerzhan Tursunov with two mahalla (local district) committee officials on 5 January arrested two Jehovah's Witnesses, Irina Korotko and Bakhtile Khalilova, when they were sharing their faith in a home. The same day and illegally without search warrants, the three officials searched Korotko's and Khalilova's homes for religious literature.

Mahalla committees are used to repress the freedom of religion and belief of people of all beliefs.

On 6 January Tursunov with the local police officer raided the home of Naile Zinedinova, another Jehovah's Witness. They broke her door down, but are not known to have brought charges against her. No charges are known to have been brought against the two police officers for breaking Zinedinova's door.

On 18 January Chirchik City Criminal Court fined Korotko five times the minimum monthly salary and Khalilova six times the minimum monthly salary. Both women were fined for religious literature "offences" under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Anti-Terrorism Police officer Tursunov refused to answer, when Forum 18 asked him on 6 June why he two days in a row raided Jehovah's Witnesses in homes, illegally searched their homes, and broke the door of a flat. "I can only tell you in my office," he claimed before putting the phone down.

Other fines for religious literature "offences" after illegal searches of private homes include: Nina Zadorkina, a Jehovah's Witness from Bektemir District in Tashkent, who was fined twice the minimum monthly salary on 6 February; and Tatyana Vychezhnina, another Tashkent Jehovah's Witness, who was fined 10 times the minimum monthly salary on 2 February.

14 large fines for International Women's Day meal upheld

In one case in Nukus in Karakalpakstan [Qorakalpoghiston], 14 Protestants on 15 April received fines totalling 350 times the minimum monthly wage or 45,584,000 Soms (130,000 Norwegian Kroner, 14,000 Euros or 15,600 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Judge Saylaubay Mambetkadyrov of Nukus City Criminal Court imposed the fines for religious literature "offences". All are members of one Protestant church, Unity, which is unregistered.

Without state registration all exercise of freedom of religion and belief is, against Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, illegal.

The fines came after an 8 March raid by Nukus Police, with Anti-Terrorism Police officer Islam Seytimbayev, on the home of married couple Ansatbay Yeshanov and Sanegul Zivatdinova. The couple with other members of the Church were celebrating International Women's Day with a meal together.

Mostly plain clothes police broke into the couple's home through the garden, searched the house, filmed the meeting, and detained all those present for questioning at Nukus Police Station. The homes of five of the Protestants were then raided and searched for religious literature. Police refused on 2 June to explain their actions to Forum 18.

"Though we all wrote in our statements that we were celebrating International Women's Day, the police wrote in the report that we had a religious meeting without state permission," a local Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 26 May.

Judge Mambetkadyrov also on 15 May ordered the confiscation of Christian materials and literature, including two Russian-language Bibles, two Bibles and three New Testaments in Karakalpak, and 19 other Christian texts with various videocassette tapes and other material. Court officials refused to explain to Forum 18 on 2 June why the fines and confiscations were ordered.

Fines upheld

Judge Khozhahmet Asanov, Deputy Chair of Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court, upheld the fines on 23 May, a member of the Church, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 26 May. "Why should we pay such huge fines, which none of us can afford, for just meeting with our friends and co-believers in a home?" the Protestant asked.

Asked why such large fines were imposed, Judge Asanov on 2 June stated: "If you don't like our decision then you can make an appeal". When Forum 18 asked whether people in Uzbekistan can exercise freedom of religion and belief, the Judge replied "maybe". He then put the phone down.

The Protestants intend to file an appeal with Uzbekistan's Supreme Court in Tashkent.

Two jailed

In another case, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses received fines totalling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly salary or 136,752,000 Soms (390,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 47,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Two of the Jehovah's Witnesses were also given 10-day jail terms.

The accused were prosecuted for breaking Administrative Code Articles 184-2 and Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Part 1 ("Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the unauthorised organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship").

Fines, rape threat for religious literature

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (25.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bi1izZ> - Of four female Jehovah's Witnesses detained by Samarkand police for meeting for worship, one faced rape threats, Forum 18 has learnt. Three were fined for "illegal" religious literature. Two Protestants – one spent 16 days in prison - have fled Uzbekistan to escape "police persecution".

Individuals across Uzbekistan continue to face fines for religious literature found during police raids in homes. Samarkand City Criminal Court in the central Samarkand Region on 15 March handed down huge fines to three Jehovah's Witnesses women for religious materials found on their tablet device, Forum 18 notes. During nearly 24 hours in detention at Samarkand City Police in early February, officers hit the women and demanded that they renounce their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers threatened one with rape.

Two Protestants - Latipzhon Mamazhanov and Murot Turdiyev - have chosen to flee Uzbekistan with their families after what fellow Protestants have described to Forum 18 as continuous pressure from the authorities.

The Court and Police in Fergana are searching for Mamazhanov to punish him for a second time for the same "offence" of possessing religious literature. Local Protestants complained to Forum 18 that he became very sick during 16 days in prison in Fergana in March.

Between February and March Almalyk City Police raided Turdiyev's home in Almalyk, cut off its electricity, ambushed his home waiting to catch him, threatened him with a criminal case, and asked him to become a police informer. Also Fergana Police seized his car for 12 days, and Fergana Court warned him (see below).

Tight controls

Uzbekistan retains tight state controls on all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Printed literature, videos and DVDs of religious content have long been subjected to harsh prior compulsory state censorship. Police and secret police officers frequently raid homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. Courts frequently order that such confiscated religious literature be destroyed. A court in Tashkent ordered Bibles and New Testaments destroyed in December 2015.

Prisoners of conscience Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen, and Zoirjon Mirzayev are both serving five year prison terms for having Muslim sermons on their mobile phones when they entered Uzbekistan.

Mass raids, fined, short-term jailings

Across Uzbekistan the authorities continue raiding individuals' homes – including those of Protestants of various denominations and Jehovah's Witnesses - and confiscating their religious literature. On 17 May, officers raided Council of Churches Baptists in Khorezm Region.

Between January and May, at least 14 Protestants and 49 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have received fines of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

A fine of 100 times the minimum monthly wage – currently 1,302,400 Soms – is equivalent to 3,700 Norwegian Kroner, 400 Euros or 450 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate.

In one case in Nukus in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, 14 Protestants received total fines of 350 times the minimum monthly wage or 45,584,000 Soms (130,000 Norwegian Kroner, 14,000 Euros or 15,600 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

In another case, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses received fines totalling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage or 136,752,000 Soms (390,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 47,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Two of the Jehovah's Witnesses were also given ten-day jail terms.

Raids, large fines and confiscations of "illegal" religious literature continue, at least 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses having been fined up to 60 times the minimum monthly salary.

Samarkand literature fines follow raid on religious meeting

Judge Zafar Kholikulov of Samarkand City Court on 15 March fined three female Jehovah's Witnesses for meeting for worship in a home in February. Each was fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 6,512,000 Soms. They were punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for possessing "illegal" literature.

On the evening of 3 February Samarkand Police arrested the three together with another local resident with whom they were meeting for worship and religious study. Police held the four women at a Samarkand Police Station for almost 24 hours. The Police confiscated their tablet device and passports before releasing them in the afternoon of 4 February.

While in detention, two of the women were "physically abused", while another female Jehovah's Witness was "subjected to sexual harassment", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 on 25 April.

Asked why Judge Kholikulov fined the Jehovah's Witnesses, the official who answered his phone on 23 May, replied that he (refused to give his name) is the Assistant to the Judge, and that he is "on a vacation." He declined to comment on the decision and tell Forum 18 whether the Court investigated the police abuses. He referred Forum 18 to the Chancellery.

A Chancellery official (who refused to give his name) looked up Kholikulov's decision, but refused to explain the reasons of the fines. "I cannot comment," he told Forum 18 on 23 May.

Police torture female Jehovah's Witnesses

At Samarkand's Police Station No.6 in early February, the four women were questioned by Officer Sanjar Esanov, Chief of the Station, Lieutenant Askarali Boykobilov and Officer Sobir Rakhimov (both of whom are Esanov's subordinates), as well as Officer Khusrav Shamsiyev of Samarkand's Anti-Terrorism Police.

The officers who questioned the women were "drunk and very aggressive", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "They demanded that the women deny their faith." Lieutenant Boykobilov "roughly grasped the shoulders of [one of the women] and kept pushing her". Another was also "pushed", and Officer Shamsiyev "slapped her on the face".

Chief Officer Esanov took another of the four women to a dark room and "strangled her and hit her on the body", Jehovah's Witnesses complained. Officer Rakhimov also slapped her face. Officer Esanov threatened to "undress her and rape her, after which he will take her out of the room naked so the others could see. Then he began unbuttoning her overcoat but she resisted and he stopped."

Police Chief Esanov adamantly denied to Forum 18 that he or his colleagues abused the Jehovah's Witnesses. "It's all a pack of lies. Police in Uzbekistan never act in such a way," he told Forum 18 from Samarkand on 23 May.

The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Uzbekistan acceded to in 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention Uzbekistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture. Under Article 4 Uzbekistan is obliged to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

Asked why police arrested the four women, Esanov responded: "Ask the Court, everything is explained in its decision."

Told that Forum 18 has documented many cases where police in Samarkand and elsewhere in Uzbekistan have arrested and abused individuals for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief - including Jehovah's Witnesses - and asked why Police and other authorities violate individuals' human rights, Chief Esanov paused and Forum 18 could hear him consult his officers. "If you disagree with us then talk to the Court," he responded, before declining to talk to Forum 18 further.

Families flee "police persecution"

Two members of the same Protestant Church, Latipzhon Mamazhanov from Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan and Murot Turdiyev from Almalyk in Tashkent Region, have fled Uzbekistan after continuous pressure from the authorities, their fellow-believers complained to Forum 18 on 12 May. Both were "sick and tired of the police persecution, and therefore took their families and left Uzbekistan," they said.

Mamazhanov was arrested and jailed on 12 March for 15 days in Fergana, the same day police illegally raided his home and those of other local Protestants searching for religious literature. He was released only on 28 March, one day after he should have been released under the law. Mamazhanov was imprisoned in the Region's Kuva District Police Detention Centre where up to seven inmates were put in a cell designed for two people, no sanitary and hygiene rules are followed, and food is given only once a day. He and other prisoners who insisted they were innocent of crime were also tortured several times.

After his release from prison, Mamazhanov "felt very sick and found he had developed several diseases", Protestants complained to Forum 18. They said that during his imprisonment he lost seven kilos in weight, developed shingles and experienced stomach problems. "The prison made him practically an invalid," Protestants lamented.

Harsh treatment and even torture in prisons is common.

Protestants note that Mamazhanov suffers from hepatitis, diabetes, osteochondrosis of his back and spine, and two hernias of his spine.

New case against Mamazhanov?

Since early May Fergana City Court and Police have attempted to bring Mamazhanov before the Court to hand him an administrative fine for the 12 March confiscation of religious literature from his home, his fellow-believers told Forum 18. "He was already jailed after that Police raid and confiscation, and now the authorities are looking to punish him a second time for the same alleged offence," local Protestants complained to Forum 18.

An official of Fergana City Court Chancellery (who did not give her name) told Forum 18 that the Police had brought a case against Mamazhanov under Administrative Code Article 184-2, but that the Court referred it back to the Police for further investigation. She declined to give any further information.

Rustam Yegamberdiyev, Chief of Criminal Police of Fergana Region, on 24 May referred Forum 18 to the Anti-Terrorism Police. "I don't know the details, ask them, they are leading the case," he said.

Asked about the case, Anvar Myrzayev, Chief of the Anti-Terrorism Police in Fergana, refused to talk to Forum 18. "I don't know you, and it's a wrong number," he said. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Asked about the case on 24 May, duty officers (who did not give their names) at Fergana Police refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials, but referred Forum 18 to Myrzayev.

Police threaten Turdiyev with criminal case

Police detained Turdiyev, together with Mamazhanov's brothers, in Fergana on 12 March as they tried to defend Mamazhanov against the unlawful police actions. Police confiscated his car the same day. The car was returned to him 16 days later, on 28 March, when Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev jailed Mamazhanov for 15 days, and formally cautioned Turdiyev.

On 28 April, one month after the Fergana Court warning, two plain-clothes officers of the Criminal Police in Almalyk stopped Turdiyev while he was trying to get in his car, local Protestants told Forum 18. Turdiyev was taken to Almalyk Police Station where he was questioned.

Officer Alisher (last name not given) of the Criminal Police questioned Turdiyev, demanding that he write a statement. Turdiyev was "threatened that he will be put in prison unless he stops writing complaints about police actions," local Protestants complained. Officer Alisher told Turdiyev that "Police will plant drugs or bullets on him, and open a fabricated case against him." However, Turdiyev refused to do so or sign the police report. Officers, "seeing that they could not achieve what they want", then released him.

Turdiyev's home ambushed by Police

While Turdiyev was being tried by the Fergana Court on 28 March, one police officer in uniform and several plain-clothes officials came to his home in Almalyk at 8 am and "began pounding and kicking on the doors for one hour." Turdiyev's "neighbours came out to the noise and asked them why they behaved in such an unruly way." The officials answered that "they want to see Turdiyev and check up on his flat."

The officials then "took turns putting their ears to the door to see whether or not Turdiyev was in the flat." After this they turned off electricity to Turdiyev's flat and left.

However, "unidentified Police officers set up an ambush not far from the home, and began waiting to catch him."

When Turdiyev returned from Fergana to Almalyk on 1 April, he found out that all the food in their refrigerator was spoiled because the electricity had been cut off. Food, which included beef, sausage, and lard and products, cost Turdiyev some 107,000 Soms.

Turdiyev harassed earlier

Two officers of Almalyk Police also earlier on 20 February raided Turdiyev's home at 6.30 am under the guise of a passport inspection in the building, Protestants complained to Forum 18.

They checked the passports of Turdiyev, his wife and children, as well as the title deed of their flat, taking copies of it. "We found out later that in the entire building, police checked up only on Turdiyev's flat. This shows that there was no passport regime check-up. The police only wanted to harass him and his family."

Turdiyev was on the same day "against his will" taken to Almalyk Police Station. There an officer who would not give his name but said he was Chief of the Criminal Police "demanded that he write a statement explaining why he travels abroad, which countries and for what purpose he visited, why he chose to buy a flat in Almalyk, why he was registered with his family and lives in Almalyk." Police also demanded that he should write about the lifestyle of his family members, their sources of money, and about his family and other relations.

The Police Chief then asked Turdiyev to become an informer for the police, Protestants complained. However, Turdiyev refused to do so.

Asked why the police are pressuring Turdiyev, Ravshan Amilov, Chief of Almalyk's Criminal Police, claimed to Forum 18 on 24 May that "I know him but we do not have such facts." When Forum 18 asked why his colleagues ambushed Turdiyev's home and turned off his electricity, as well as why he was brought to the Criminal Police and threatened with a criminal case, Amilov did not say. "I will ask the terrorism Police about the case and you call us back some time later," he said.

Jahongir Baltayev, Chief of Almalyk Anti-Terrorism Police refused to talk to Forum 18 on 24 May. "It's a wrong number," he replied. Told that Almalyk Police gave his number to Forum 18, he put the phone down.

Poor jail conditions, torture and large fines for Protestants

Forum 18 (13.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Tly3Lj> - Latipzhon Mamazhanov, a Protestant who was arrested and jailed on 12 March for 15 days in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan, was released from jail on 28 March. This is one day after he should have been released under the law, local Protestants who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service on 31 March. Police illegally raided Mamazhanov's home and those of other Christians in Fergana on 12 March searching for religious literature.

Summarising the reason for censorship and raids against Christians and Muslims, a state news agency published an article stating that the government aimed to "isolate the population".

Also, four members of a Protestant church without state permission to exist have been given large fines and had a Bible and New Testament confiscated from them (see below).

Poor jail conditions

Mamazhanov was imprisoned in Fergana Region's Kuva District Police Detention Centre with between five and seven other prisoners in a cell intended for two people with two iron beds. "Two inmates slept on the beds while the others - including Mamazhanov - slept on mattresses laid on the concrete floor", Protestants noted. "The mattresses were provided only at nights and taken away at 6 am. Pillows and blankets were not provided."

Prisoners were not allowed to sit on the beds during the day, and were given poor food once a day. They were kept in the cell all day and were not allowed visits by relatives, friends or their lawyers.

"The cells were not heated, and at nights a cold wind blew from under the cell door. The cell was full of lice and bugs," local Protestants stated.

Between 23 and 27 March, two prisoners with tuberculosis (TB) were placed in Mamazhanov's cell.

Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov – on a 16-year jail term from June 2013 – was also deliberately exposed to the potentially fatal disease of TB. Tursunov's relatives thought this was an attempt to kill him and he was moved to another prison in December 2013.

In the mornings police officers in Kuva Police Detention Centre "shouted at the inmates and, pushing and hitting them, took them to the lavatory to wash, giving them only three minutes to do so. No soap or items of personal hygiene were given."

The United Nations (UN) Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in revised form on 17 December 2015 and known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3) require governments to respect the religious freedom and other human rights of prisoners. Uzbekistan routinely ignores them.

Torture

"Several times police officers took Mamazhanov and other inmates who insisted they were innocent of crime to another room in the Detention Centre and tortured them by hitting them," local Protestants complained. The UN Committee Against Torture has found that torture is "routine" in Uzbekistan.

Three police informers were placed in Mamazhanov's cell, who tried to gain his confidence and convince him to claim that he committed unsolved crimes. The informers, local Protestants stated, claimed that if Mamazhanov did not admit to unsolved crimes he would be charged with "religious extremism" and given a long prison term.

"It is not true"?

Lieutenant Colonel Ikhtiyor Millazhanov, Chief of Kuva Police, put his phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself on 7 April and asked about Mamazhanov. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

The Head of Kuva District Police Detention Centre, Akrom Kuchkarov insisted that police had not tortured Mamazhanov and other prisoners, claiming to Forum 18 on 7 April that "it is not true".

Asked why up to seven inmates were put in a cell designed for two people, no sanitary and hygiene rules are followed, and food is only given once a day, Kuchkarov hesitated and then said: "Why don't you come here and see with your own eyes that we have very good conditions?"

Why was Mamazhanov jailed?

Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana Criminal Court jailed Mamazhanov. Between 31 March and 12 April Court officials (who would not give their names) repeatedly claimed that the Judge was busy and would not explain to Forum 18 why Mamazhanov was jailed for alleged "hooliganism".

Why was Mamazhanov kept in jail illegally?

Asked why Mamazhanov was released only on 28 March - instead of 27 March when he should have been released - the Head of Kuva District Police Detention Centre Kuchkarov claimed: "That is not true, he was released on 27 March."

As of 13 April, Fergana Criminal Court had still not provided Mamazhanov with a copy of the 12 March verdict, Protestants told Forum 18. On 26 March his legal representative filed an appeal against the verdict to Fergana Regional Criminal Court through Fergana City Court. But the City Court on 29 March illegally refused to pass on the case to the Regional Court claiming - wrongly - that cassation appeals should be lodged within 10 days of the verdict.

Police visit

Ikror Butayev and Akhror Akhmedov of Fergana Police visited Mamazhanov after his release, Protestants told Forum 18. Both police officers refused to tell Forum 18 whether they will bring any new charges against Mamazhanov. "I am only a police officer and cannot discuss it with you," Akhmedov told Forum 18 on 7 April. He then put the phone down.

Fine promised

As well as raiding Mamazhanov's home on 12 March, on the same day police raided five other Christian homes in Fergana.

Among those raided was one of Mamazhanov's brothers, Marifzhon. Seven police, including T. Boltabayev of Fergana's Criminal Police and Inspector Sh. Shomirzayev, raided Marifzhon Mamazhanov's home at 6.30 am without a search warrant. Officers illegally confiscated a tablet device, a computer hard disc, a mobile phone, and Christian books bought from the officially registered Bible Society in the capital Tashkent.

Police told Marifzhon Mamazhanov that he would be charged and fined under the Code of Administrative Offences Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). This is because he allegedly "illegally stored Christian books in his home", local Protestants told Forum 18.

Illegal prayer - "the same for Christians, Muslims and others"

"We were told that Begzod Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee has stated that books purchased from the Bible Society can be used only inside Churches and not in homes," Protestants said. The authorities have long tried to impose censorship against religious books in homes.

"They can keep one Bible in their homes," Rustam Yegamberdiyev, Head of Fergana City Criminal Police, insisted to Forum 18 on 12 April. "But if they keep more than one then this means that they are intending to gather others in their homes for illegal prayers and meetings. It is exactly the same for Christians, Muslims and others." He then ended the call.

Protestants described this policy to Forum 18 as "nonsense and outrageous".

Police obstruct complaint to prosecutor

When local Protestants heard of the 12 March raids, that day one of them, Murot Turdiyev, and two of Mamazhanov's brothers told police they will report them to Kirgili District Prosecutor's Office (which is between Margilan and Fergana). The Protestants went to the Prosecutor's Office in Turdiyev's car and police followed them in three cars.

When they came to the Prosecutor's Office and got out of the car, police officers prevented them entering the Prosecutor's Office. Lieutenant Colonel Otabek Azimov, Deputy Head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), made a phone call and in five minutes Sergeants Farhodzhon Mahmudov and Ulugbek Khasanov of Margilan City Traffic Police arrived. The Traffic Police confiscated Turdiyev's car, claiming that he had allegedly violated traffic rules – even though they could not prove this.

Turdiyev was tried by Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana City Criminal Court under Administrative Code Article 194 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order") between 24 and 28 March. On 28 March he gave Turdiyev a formal warning. After the hearing Traffic Police returned Turdiyev's car.

Turdiyev is under regular police surveillance. In May 2015 he was tortured by police after his car was stopped, and lost consciousness as a result.

The phones of Margilan City Traffic Police and its Head Major Anvar Sotivoldiyev went unanswered on 12 April. Lieutenant Colonel Azimov of Fergana CID claimed to Forum 18 on 18 March that "I am busy" and referred Forum 18 to Major Anvar Myrzayev from the CID. Myrzayev's phone was not answered between 18 March and 12 April.

Raided, fined

On 7 February police in Okdarya District of the central Samarkand Region raided the home of local Christian Malika Khaidirova. During the raid, officers confiscated one Bible and one New Testament, both in Uzbek.

Khaidirova, along with Munis Oblakulov, Sanobar Aripova and Khudoyor Muhamadiyev, were brought to court under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons"), 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") and 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

All four members of a Protestant church without state permission to exist were fined. Judge Shohmurod Begmatov of Okdarya District Criminal Court on 22 March fined:

Oblakulov 60 times the minimum monthly salary or 7,814,400 Soms (about 22,300 Norwegian Kroner, 2,400 Euros, or 2,700 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate); Khidirova 20 times the minimum monthly salary or 2,604,800 Soms (about 7,430 Norwegian Kroner, 800 Euros, or 900 US Dollars); and Aripova and Muhamadiyev 10 times the minimum monthly salary or 1,302,400 Soms each (about 3,715 Norwegian Kroner, 400 Euros, or 450 US Dollars).

Judge Begmatov also ordered the formal confiscation of the Bible and New Testament. He refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. "The defendants can appeal against my verdict if they do not agree", he stated on 12 April. "I am not empowered to discuss the verdict with you over the phone."

"His only fault was to have some sermons on his mobile phone"

Forum 18 (07.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SMCsXB> - Three months after Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police arrested Kyrgyzstan-born Russian citizen Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev at Tashkent Airport and opened a criminal case against him, relatives fear he might face long imprisonment if tried and convicted. Relatives adamantly denied to Forum 18 News Service that Khudaiberdiyev had any extremist materials on his phone. "Bakhtiyor had only some suras [verses] from the Holy Koran, some sermons of mullo Ulugbek Kary and some video clips of the Osh events he downloaded from the internet," relatives told Forum 18. Fears are that Khudaiberdiyev might face torture in secret police detention. The Consular Section of the Russian Embassy in Tashkent refused to tell Forum 18 what steps – if any – the Embassy or other Russian state bodies are taking to raise his case with the Uzbek authorities. Uzbekistan imposes rigid control over all religious materials, whether on paper or on electronic devices. At least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones, while Customs authorities detained a Baptist for two days in mid-March for carrying religious materials on electronic devices and who now faces administrative charges.

On 9 January Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police arrested ethnic Uzbek Russian citizen Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev at Tashkent Airport for religious and other materials in his mobile phone. "For almost three months he has been kept in the detention centre of the NSS secret police in Yunusabad District of Tashkent," relatives who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals complained to Forum 18 on 1 April. He faces possible criminal prosecution, with a long prison term if convicted. Fears are that he might be tortured.

Khudaiberdiyev faces charges under Criminal Code Article 244-2 (establishment, direction of or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations) and Article 159 (offence against the Constitutional order). Punishments under these Articles range up to twenty years' imprisonment.

"We are afraid that he may receive a lengthy prison term in Uzbekistan," Khudaiberdiyev's relatives lamented to Forum 18.

Officials of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, including Bekzod Kadyrov, Chief expert, refused absolutely to discuss the case. "No comments over the phone, please, send questions in writing," Kadyrov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 7 April.

Rigid control of religious materials

The Uzbek authorities impose rigid control of religious materials entering and being transported within the country not only on paper but on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media. At least two Muslims - Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov and Zoirjon Mirzayev - are serving five-year prison terms for the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones. A Baptist from neighbouring Kazakhstan was held for two days at Tashkent Regional Customs Department in mid-March for carrying religious materials on electronic devices and now faces administrative charges.

A January 2014 Cabinet of Ministers Decree on religious literature requires the State Customs Committee and the State Borders Protection Committee (part of the National Security Service secret police) to seize all religious materials being imported. They are to be sent for "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee. Only if it approves them are such materials allowed to be handed back to travellers.

Printed literature, videos and DVDs of religious content have long been subjected to harsh prior compulsory state censorship. Police and secret police officers frequently raid homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. Courts frequently order that such confiscated religious literature be destroyed, as happened to Bibles and New Testaments in Tashkent in December 2015. In March 2016, Latipzhon Mamazhanov, a Christian in Fergana [Farghona], was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious literature.

Mamazhanov was imprisoned for one day more than his 15 day term and was tortured during the prison term. He also faces new administrative charges (see forthcoming F18News article).

Airport arrest

Uzbek Customs officials detained Khudaiberdiyev at Tashkent Airport on 9 January as he was changing planes in transit from South Korea to Osh, Kyrgyzstan, relatives told Forum 18. He had travelled from his home in Russia to South Korea to earn money. On the return journey he decided to visit his mother and wife, who currently live in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. "He travelled via Tashkent because it was cheaper to do so."

Customs officials at the airport detained Khudaiberdiyev for carrying on his mobile phone allegedly "extremist" religious materials, as well as video materials about the ethnic conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in his native Osh in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, which left hundreds dead.

However, relatives adamantly denied to Forum 18 that Khudaiberdiyev had any extremist materials on his phone. "Bakhtiyor had only some suras [verses] from the Holy Koran, some sermons of mullo Ulugbek Kary and some video clips of the Osh events he downloaded from the internet." They said that the Uzbek authorities allow Imam Ulugbek Kary, who lives and works in Andijan Region, "to preach at weddings and other ceremonies. His sermons are sold freely at markets in Uzbekistan".

"Everybody in the region knows about the Osh events," relatives added. "Bakhtiyor did not participate in the conflict - he only downloaded the videos from the internet."

The 34-year-old Khudaiberdiyev, a Kyrgyzstan-born ethnic Uzbek who later took Russian citizenship, has a wife and two daughters aged 4 and 2. "He left behind his old mother and his wife, both of whom are unemployed, as well as his two small daughters," relatives told Forum 18. "It is hard for them to survive with no income."

Relatives find out about arrest only after 25 days

Relatives learned of Khudaiberdiyev's arrest only after 25 days, they complained to Forum 18. "Bakhtiyor made a phone call to his mother and wife in Osh from Tashkent airport saying where he was and that he was about to visit them." Because he did not arrive in Osh that day or soon after, relatives called various Uzbekistan authorities to find out Khudaiberdiyev's whereabouts, but without success.

Finally, his mother travelled on 3 February to Tashkent Airport, where Airport Customs officials told her that they had referred her son's case to the NSS secret police and that Khudaiberdiyev was being kept at NSS Yunusbad detention centre. She went to the prison the same day.

At Yunusabad District NSS, Investigator Mansur Irgashev told her in person that Khudaiberdiyev is being accused of religious extremism and inciting inter-ethnic hatred under the two Criminal Code Articles.

Father asked to witness against son

Meanwhile on 17 March, more than two months after Khudaiberdiyev's arrest and more than a month after his mother visited him at the NSS secret police detention centre in Yunusabad, two persons who presented themselves as Police officials visited Khudaiberdiyev's father who resides in Vladivostok, Russia. They told him that Uzbekistan is searching for his son, relatives told Forum 18.

The father could not remember the names or workplace of the persons in their identification documents since "they just let him have a quick glance at their IDs", relatives added. The officials asked the father whether his son is involved in any extremist religious activity and who his friends are. However, the father told them that Khudaiberdiyev "is no extremist" and that "he does not pray or even go to mosque regularly. His only fault was to have some sermons on his mobile phone."

No comments from officials

Investigator Bahodir (who did not his last name) of Tashkent Airport's Customs Investigation Department on 5 April declined to tell Forum why Khudayberdiyev was stopped by customs officials and exactly what he violated. He passed the phone to another official (who refused to give his name), who wrote down Khudayberdiyev's details, and after pausing for a moment told Forum 18: "We cannot discuss the case with you over the phone." He then referred Forum 18 to Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry.

Uzbekistan's NSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent did not answer the phones between 5 and 7 April.

Ilham Usmanov, Prosecutor of Tashkent's Yunusabad District, declined to talk to Forum 18 on 6 April. He asked it to talk to him through his Assistant. The Assistant's phone went unanswered on 6 and 7 April. Subsequent calls to Prosecutor Usmanov on 6 and 7 April went unanswered.

Phones went unanswered at Tashkent City Prosecutor's office each time Forum 18 called on 7 April.

Because Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18, it was unable to find out whether the works of Imam Ulugbek Kary are banned in Uzbekistan.

An official of the Consular Section of the Russian Embassy in Tashkent, who did not give his name, took down the details of Khudaiberdiyev's arrest on 1 April. However, he refused to tell Forum 18 what steps – if any – the Embassy or other Russian state bodies are taking to raise his case with the Uzbek authorities. He asked Forum 18 to send

questions in writing. Forum 18 wrote to the Embassy on 5 April, but had received no reply by the end of the working day in Tashkent on 7 April.

Nadezhda Atayeva of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) told Forum 18 from France on 6 April that her organisation, together with the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), has not received a response to letters about Khudaiberdiyev's case they sent on 25 March to Russia's Foreign Ministry as well as the Permanent Representative of Russia in the United Nations.

"We are seriously concerned that Khudaiberdiyev may be tortured"

During her February visit, Khudaiberdiyev's mother was allowed to see her son for one and half hours. "Bakhtiyor told her that he is being fed and treated normally, and that she should not worry," relatives told Forum 18. "He several times repeated that he does not know why he is being accused of extremism and why he was arrested. But he couldn't complain about his arrest or say anything displeasing the authorities since the meeting took place in the room where Investigator Irgashev was present and he was taking down notes of their conversation."

The mother after the meeting was accompanied away by Investigator Irgashev. "She had to leave Uzbekistan already on 5 February since she could not register privately as a guest, and all foreigners without a visa or registration cannot stay in Uzbekistan for more than three days."

Atayeva told Forum 18 that "we are seriously concerned that Khudaiberdiyev may be tortured or physically abused while in NSS detention."

The use by the authorities of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to publicly discuss their experiences.

"We don't know what is happening to Bakhtiyor and have no way to find out"

One relative wept over the phone and told Forum 18 that "we don't know what is happening to Bakhtiyor and have no way to find out."

The relatives lamented to Forum 18 that neither they nor Khudaiberdiyev's mother or wife can afford to travel to Tashkent, nor do they have anyone legally defending him. "Even the lawyer appointed by the Uzbek authorities called the mother and told her that he is no longer representing her son."

They said that air travel is the only option left to travel to Tashkent. "It is now the only way of communication open between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan after the land border-crossing points were closed after the recent border incident between the two countries."

Relatives added that, even if they could travel to Tashkent, they could stay there only for three days since they have no relatives or friends in Uzbekistan with whom could register to stay there longer.

Sherzod (who refused to give his last name), who was assigned as Khudaiberdiyev's lawyer, refused to discuss the case. "You are only a human rights defender and not his legal representative," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 7 April. "So I can't give you any information. Besides, this is a highly secret case." He then put the phone down.

"Aren't you exaggerating by saying he was detained?"

Forum 18 (21.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SfvKPC> - Tashkent Regional Customs Department held Kazakh citizen Boris Prokopenko for two days in mid-March after discovering religious materials on electronic devices as he entered Uzbekistan, fellow Baptists complained to Forum 18 News Service. Freed after an "expert analysis" found nothing "extremist", he still faces administrative prosecution. "Aren't you exaggerating by saying he was detained? He was only staying with us temporarily since we were waiting for the expert analysis from the Religious Affairs Committee," Chief Customs Inspector Tahir Nasirkhodjayev told Forum 18. He denied any violation of Prokopenko's rights, as "we only enforce the Law, which demands us to stop and clarify what kind of religious materials people carry with them". Six Muslims were fined after being stopped in December 2015 for carrying "illegal" religious materials on their mobile phones, customs officials told Forum 18. Such punishments are part of the rigid control of religious materials entering and being transported within the country on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media. At least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones.

Uzbekistan continues its rigid control of religious materials entering and being transported within the country on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media, Forum 18 News Service notes. This control parallels the control of printed and other religious materials. Uzbek Customs officials on 13 March stopped a Baptist from neighbouring Kazakhstan, Boris Prokopenko, at a border-crossing between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for carrying religious materials on electronic devices. Officials kept him for two days at Tashkent Regional Customs Department. They released him after opening an administrative case against him.

Meanwhile, six Muslims were fined after being stopped in December 2015 for carrying "illegal" religious materials on their mobile phones, Tashkent City Customs Department told Forum 18 on 10 March. Officials refused to give specific details of any of the cases (see below).

Forum 18 tried to find out whether it is legal or illegal for individuals to have religious material in electronic devices and why individuals are punished – often severely – if they do. However, the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent refused to discuss the issue and cases with Forum 18.

Artykbek Yusupov, Chair of the Committee, Press-Secretary Shovkat Hamdamov and Sobitjon Nasimov, Chief of the "Expert analysis" Section, all refused to talk to Forum 18 on 16 March. Shukhrat, as he introduced himself, the official who answered the phone of Zulhaydar Sultanov, Chief of the International Relations Section, said that Sultanov is "not available" to talk and that he himself "cannot comment" on the issues since "I am only a volunteer worker".

A January 2014 Cabinet of Ministers Decree on religious literature requires the State Customs Committee and the State Borders Protection Committee (part of the National Security Service secret police) to seize all religious materials being imported. They are to be sent for "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee. Only if it approves them are such materials allowed to be handed back to travellers.

Searches, seizures, fines, prison terms

Printed literature, videos and DVDs of religious content have long been subjected to harsh prior compulsory state censorship. Police and secret police officers frequently raid homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. Courts frequently

order that such confiscated religious literature be destroyed, as happened to Bibles and New Testaments in Tashkent in December 2015. In March 2016, a Christian in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious literature.

The growth in the use of electronic devices in recent years has seen officials devote increasing attention to them. Officials often search mobile phones and other electronic devices in the hunt for religious materials. When they find such content - including holy books, sermons or religious music - punishments can range from long prison terms (especially when the material is Muslim) to administrative fines.

Prisoner of conscience Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen arrested in Uzbekistan in 2013 for carrying the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone, is serving a five-year prison term. Also serving a five-year prison term handed down in 2014 is Zoirjon Mirzayev, originally from Fergana. He was arrested at a Tashkent Region train station on returning from Russia to his native Uzbekistan, after customs officials found 29 sermon recordings.

In 2015 the authorities stopped the import of 50,000 religious materials into Uzbekistan and opened 1,200 cases, the state news agency UzA on 11 January 2016 cited State Customs and other law-enforcement agencies as declaring. "Extremist religious materials were found on mobile electronic devices of many citizens traveling back from abroad," it complained.

Two individuals were stopped at Tashkent airport after religious sermons were found in their phones, while two more individuals were stopped at a train station after materials officials claim were "extremist" were found in their phones (see below).

In another instance, an Uzbek citizen who returned to the country in late 2015 was fined for religious content in a mobile phone, friends told Forum 18, asking that the individual not be identified. Officers had discovered the religious materials when the mobile phone was checked as the individual re-entered the country. An administrative case was prepared and a court fined the individual 30 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,907,200 Soms.

However, when an officer at a regional airport discovered Christian materials in an individual's mobile phone in early 2016, the officer merely deleted the material before handing back the phone, the individual told Forum 18.

Also Police in Samarkand Region in summer 2015 stopped two Jehovah's Witnesses in a park for carrying a tablet device which contained religious materials. A Samarkand Court then fined the two (see below).

Two day detention, administrative case for religious materials on device

On 13 March Uzbek Customs officials stopped Prokopenko, a Kazakhstan citizen, at Gisht-Kuprik border-crossing point between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, his fellow Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 16 March.

Prokopenko, who came to visit Baptist friends in Uzbekistan, was stopped "because customs officials found a leaflet in his pocket during a search. The leaflet had the word Christ on it, and so the officials took him to a separate room, where his luggage was thoroughly checked." Officials then found that the electronic book and memory stick he carried with him had on them Christian materials in Russian.

"Boris was taken from Gisht-Kuprik Station to the Tashkent Regional Customs Department in Tashkent City, and detained for two days," the Baptists complained.

Customs officials sent his religious materials for an "expert analysis" at the state Religious Affairs Committee. Officials also opened an administrative case against him.

When they released him on 15 March, officials did, however, return Prokopenko's electronic book and memory stick as he left the Department, the Baptists added.

"Aren't you exaggerating by saying he was detained?"

Tahir Nasirkhodjayev, Chief Customs Inspector of the Department, told Forum 18 that an administrative case was opened against Prokopenko under Administrative Code Article 227-22 for not declaring that he carried with him religious materials. This carries a fine for individuals of five to ten times the minimum monthly wage and confiscation of the items. "But we may confine ourselves to only giving him a warning, since he is not an Uzbek citizen," he claimed.

Asked why his Department detained Prokopenko for two days, Inspector Nasirkhodjayev responded: "Aren't you exaggerating by saying he was detained? He was only staying with us temporarily since we were waiting for the expert analysis of his materials from the Religious Affairs Committee. And then we let him go after we received an answer that nothing extremist was found in his materials."

Asked if he does not think this a violation of Prokopenko's rights, Inspector Nasirkhodjayev replied: "No, because we only enforce the Law, which demands us to stop and clarify what kind of religious materials people carry with them." Asked whether he does not think the controls on religious literature enshrined in the Religion Law and the Cabinet of Ministers Decree violate the rights of individuals, he referred Forum 18 to the state Religious Affairs Committee. He refused to discuss the issue further.

Cases for religious sermons in mobile phones

After searching the mobile phones of I. Khamidov and M. Salimov, two passengers arriving from Ufa, Customs officials at Tashkent airport discovered respectively ten and thirty "illegal" religious sermons on various topics, state-controlled news agency Uza on 11 January cited State Customs and other law-enforcement agencies as declaring. Cases were opened against the two. Uza did not say when the incident occurred or whether the cases were administrative or criminal.

Asked what charges were brought against Khamidov and Salimov, officials of Tashkent City Airport Customs (no names were given) on 10 March referred Forum 18 to its Investigations Department. Investigator Ilhom (who did not give his last name) told Forum 18 the same day that Chief Investigator Akmal Jalilov was "not available at the moment" and asked it to call back in 30 minutes. Called back, the same officer told Forum 18: "Even if we are investigating the cases, we cannot inform you over the phone. Please send us a letter."

"Importing into Uzbekistan illegal religious materials on electronic devices"

Two individuals returning to Uzbekistan from Russia – identified as F. Bekmatov and Sh. Odilov – were stopped by customs officials at Keles train station in Tashkent, Uza also reported. Bekmatov was travelling from Moscow and Odilov from Ufa. Searches "revealed extremist religious video materials on the mobile phone propagating violence".

Uza did not identify the video materials, so it is impossible to find out whether the materials were indeed violent or not.

Cases were opened against both Bekmatov and Odilov. Uza did not say when the incident occurred or whether the cases were administrative or criminal.

Asked what charges were brought against Bekmatov and Odilov, Keles Station customs officials, who would not give their names, refused to discuss the cases. They referred Forum 18 on 10 March to Tashkent City Customs Investigations Department.

Asked about the cases against all four men, Shavkat Salihov, Chief of Tashkent City Customs Investigators, claimed to Forum 18 on 10 March he could not find "such names or such cases". However, he admitted that "six cases were opened in December 2015 for importing into Uzbekistan illegal religious materials on electronic devices". Salihov declined to give any names or more specific details of the cases but said that all cases were administrative and the punishments consisted of fines.

Asked whether he does not think the censorship is a violation of the rights of travellers, Salihov referred Forum 18 to the Religious Affairs Committee. "We as Customs organs only enforce the Law, and the Law makes the Religious Affairs Committee responsible for the import of any religious materials into the country. They must give their prior consent to any import."

Fined for religious materials in tablet device

On 2 July 2015, Judge O. Mannatov at Kattakurgan City Criminal Court of Samarkand Region punished two local Jehovah's Witnesses, Galina Podtikhova and Nilufar Bulatova, for carrying religious materials on their tablet device in a local park, Muzaffar Azykulov of the Court Chancellery told Forum 18 on 14 March 2016. Each was fined ten times the minimum monthly wage, 1,184,000 Soms, under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Asked why the Court fined the two, Azykulov told Forum 18: "Police found religious materials on their tablet device." Asked why individuals cannot carry an electronic device containing religious materials on the street without committing an "offence", he refused to say. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other Court officials.

The two women appealed against the fines, but Samarkand Regional Court rejected these appeals on 23 July 2015.

The Police had stopped the two women in the park on 22 June 2015 after noticing that they carried a tablet device, Samarkand Regional Administration's official newspaper "Samarkand Herald" reported on 23 January 2016.

Shukhrat Anorov, the author of the report, described the Jehovah's Witnesses as "sectarians" whose "activity was stopped" by the Police. He attacked the Jehovah's Witness organisation saying that it is "aiming at enslaving the conscience of man". The report said that the tablet device was "confiscated for the benefit of the state by the Court decision," and that "illegal religious materials were stored on it".

"Isolate the population"

Forum 18 (18.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SfvaBx> - Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. In at least three cases known to Forum 18 News Service, and in line with frequent court practice, a court has ordered that Bibles and New Testaments be destroyed. These violations of freedom of religion or belief continue, an entire district of the capital Tashkent being searched in early March. During the search at least one Arabic-language Koran was confiscated and its owner detained. Local police told Forum 18 that "we have religious freedoms". And on 12 March a Christian in Fergana was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious

literature. Summarising the reason for such censorship and raids, a state news agency published an article stating that the government aimed to "isolate the population, especially young people, from the influence of various harmful movements".

Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. In at least three cases known to Forum 18 News Service, and in line with frequent court practice, a court has ordered that Bibles and New Testaments be destroyed. And on 12 March a Christian in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan was jailed for 15 days after a police search for religious literature.

"The police regularly raid homes of Christians and confiscate all their literature," Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 14 March. "The authorities are trying to deprive Christians of any spiritual literature."

Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in private homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts.

In July 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the frequent raids, as well as - among other things - religious censorship, torture and fines to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. It called on Uzbekistan to "guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief".

The authorities also search for religious materials on mobile phones, tablets and other electronic devices.

Entire residential district raided for religious literature

At the beginning of March 2016, every home in Orikzor mahalla (local district), in the Uchteppa District of the capital Tashkent, was raided by 20 National Security Service (NSS) secret police and ordinary police officers to hunt for religious literature.

In at least one case, an Arabic-language Koran was confiscated as it did not have a stamp from the state's Religious Affairs Committee, residents who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 10 March. The eldest man from the family the Koran was confiscated from was detained all day at Uchteppa Police Station. "Officials could find no other literature in their home, and therefore released the man the next day," other residents told Forum 18. "But they confiscated the Koran."

Orikzor mahalla local police officer Shukhrat (who would not give his last name) claimed to Forum 18 on 10 March "we have religious freedoms", but would not say why the Koran was confiscated and the man detained all day. "We are not allowed to talk to you over the phone."

Uchteppa District Police on 10 March referred Forum 18 to Jahongir Gaziyeu from Uchteppa Anti-Terrorism Police. He said that he "cannot discuss the case with you over the phone". The so-called Anti-Terrorism Police often acts against people exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Searched, jailed

On 12 March plain clothes and ordinary police without search warrants illegally searched the homes of Latipzhon Mamazhanov and other Christians in Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan, local Christians who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told

Forum 18 on 16 March. Police searched the homes for religious literature and arrested Mamazhanov. On 12 March he was sentenced by Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev of Fergana Criminal Court to the maximum 15 days in jail under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 183 ("Hooliganism").

Short term jailings are irregularly used against a variety of people to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief, especially if there has been a previous offence. Mamazhanov was arrested and fined in 2011 under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons").

Asked about why Mamazhanov and others' houses were illegally searched and he himself jailed, Lieutenant Colonel Otabek Azimov, Deputy Head of Fergana Regional Police Criminal Investigation Division, claimed to Forum 18 on 18 March that he did not know of the case and "am not competent to answer your questions". A similar raid in Fergana, followed by fines, took place on 22 November 2015 (see below).

"Passport control" raid, confiscations, detentions and torture

Very shortly after Nikolai Serin and three other ethnic Uzbek Council of Churches Baptists from Navoi [Navoiy] Region in central Uzbekistan arrived on 5 February at the home of friends in Denau in the southern Surkhandarya Region, the local police officer and mahalla committee chair arrived. Claiming passport control as a reason, officers took the Baptists to Denau Police Station, Serin told Forum 18 on 16 March.

At the Police Station someone who claimed to be Sherzod Abdullayev, Head of the local Anti-Terrorism Police, questioned them and confiscated Christian books and a camera. The books were allegedly to be sent for "expert analysis".

"Expert analysis" is a frequent pretext for the confiscation and destruction of texts.

Police told one of the ethnic Uzbek Baptists that he had "betrayed his traditions by becoming a Christian". The Baptists were then taken to separate rooms and continuously questioned while standing up for more than eight hours, from 6 pm on 5 February until 2.20 am on 6 February. They were then allowed to sleep on chairs.

Torture, often far more severe than this, is normal in Uzbekistan.

Relatives and friends of the Baptists travelled over 600 kilometres [370 miles] to Denau Police Station to demand the Baptists' release. The internal passports of the friends and relatives were confiscated and they were also detained at the Police Station. However, all the Baptists were eventually released at 6 pm on 6 February. Baptists suspect that without the protests of the relatives and friends the originally detained Baptist group could have been given short-term jail sentences.

Dilmurod Kurbanov – the real Head of Denau Anti-Terrorism Police – put the phone down when asked by Forum 18 about the case on 16 March. Calls to him and his Deputy Jumanazar Mamatraimov were not answered on 16 or 17 March.

Raided, searched, detained, literature confiscated

On 12 December 2015 relatives of Solomon Tuayev, a Council of Churches Baptist, gave a Christian book on a Tashkent street to a man who turned out to be a plain-clothes police officer. Tuayev was temporarily staying with another Council of Churches Baptist, Gleb Izmostyev.

At 11 pm on 14 December, around 20 plain clothes police raided Izmestyev's flat in Yakkasaray District as he entered it, he told Forum 18 on 14 March. Police confiscated his mobile phone, and searched him and his flat for three hours. Officers confiscated about 750 Uzbek and Russian-language books, booklets, CDs and DVDs. They also confiscated his car and two Christian songbooks and a New Testament commentary in it, before taking Izmestyev and Tuayev to Yakkasaray District Police Station.

At the police station police the two Baptists were fingerprinted and told the confiscated literature would be sent for "expert analysis". The two were then questioned for two and a half hours, especially about where the Uzbek language texts came from. They were then charged under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

After this the two Baptists were taken to Izmestyev's parents' home in Yakkasaray District, which police illegally searched without a warrant. But finding no religious literature in the home the police left.

Azamat Nabirayev, Head of Yakkasaray Anti-Terrorism Police, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 14 March. "I do not have time for you," he claimed. "Please send all questions to the Foreign Ministry." He then put the phone down.

Fined

On 22 December Judge Khusniddin Atavaliyev of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court fined Izmestyev and Tuayev three times the minimum monthly wage or 390,720 Soms (about 1,150 Norwegian Kroner, 120 Euros, or 136 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) under Administrative Code Article 184-2. Judge Atavaliyev also ordered the destruction of all the Uzbek and Russian-language confiscated materials, without any exceptions.

However, Judge Atavaliyev on 14 March 2016 claimed to Forum 18 that "I did not order the destruction of all literature but only part of it. I ordered the rest to be handed over to local officials." He then claimed that "I can only explain my decision to the defendants and their lawyer. If they do not agree with our decision they can appeal." Izmestyev pointed out that "it is clearly written in the Judge's decision that the confiscated materials must be destroyed without any exception".

Izmestyev also stated that "one week after we received the decision in January, court officials told us that unless we pay the fine immediately the car will not be returned. So we had to pay the fine."

Raid and confiscation

On 22 November 2015 police illegally raided without a search warrant the private home of Council of Churches Baptist Raisa Kuznetsova, in Fergana. Only two of the police identified themselves, Lieutenant Akhror Akhmedov and local police officer Oybek Mahmudov.

Police confiscated 15,453 items of Christian literature, including about 900 Christian books, 10 Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments and thousands of booklets, magazines and other materials, Kuznetsova told Forum 18 on 14 March 2016. Illegally, the police did not provide a written record of the confiscations.

Lieutenant Akhmedov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 14 March.

On 23 November 2015 police took Kuznetsova and her son Boris to Fergana Police Station to question them for about three hours. Police then charged them under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and Article 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

On 24 November police took Kuznetsova to the Police Station again, allegedly to receive the confiscated literature back. Instead she was questioned for seven hours about how she had received the literature.

On 22 December Judge Nilufar Muminova of Fergana City Criminal Court fined both Baptists five times the minimum monthly salary or 651,200 Soms (about 1,900 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 230 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 and Article 240, Part 2. Judge Muminova also ordered that the confiscated books and materials be given to the Religious Affairs Committee's Fergana representative.

Asked by Forum 18 on 14 March about the confiscations, Judge Muminova claimed: "I cannot say anything on that, and I cannot do anything about my decision. Only a higher court can cancel my decision." She then added: "Let the Baptists appeal against it."

Kuznetsova told Forum 18 that they did not appeal against the verdict. "We know from our experience that it is highly unlikely that a higher court will cancel it." She also noted that only 10 days was given for an appeal to be lodged.

"Isolate the population"

Others have suffered similar raids, confiscations, fines and literature destructions, those targeted told Forum 18.

The government makes no secret of such human rights violations. Between late November 2015 and mid-January 2016, at least 18 individuals were fined for carrying with them or keeping "illegal" religious materials in their homes and further investigations continue, Forum 18 notes.

On 11 January the state-controlled Uza news agency praised what it described as the vigilance of customs officers and claimed they had stopped the import of 50,000 illegal religious texts in 2015. The state-controlled 12news agency noted similar claims, adding that "any religious propaganda outside the walls of officially registered religious buildings is banned".

Summarising the reason for such censorship and raids, Uza author Bekzod Bozorov stated that the government aimed to "isolate the population, especially young people, from the influence of various harmful movements".

"We only implement the law"

In December 2015, eight cases were opened against people for importing "illegal religious literature", Customs Investigator Shavkat Salihov of Tashkent Railway Customs Office told Forum 18 on 14 March 2016. He would not give much detail, but said that six cases related to material on electronic devices, and two to importing Islamic books without prior authorisation by the Religious Affairs Committee. He added that all those charged were fined. He admitted that one Koran was confiscated as the passenger had not declared it in their customs declaration.

Asked whether he thinks the censorship is a violation of the passengers' freedom of religion or belief, Salihov responded: "Customs organs only implement the law, which

makes the Religious Affairs Committee responsible for the import of any religious materials into the country. They must give their prior consent to any import in advance."

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss either the censorship or any raids, fines, confiscations or destructions with Forum 18 on 16 March. Committee Chair Artykbek Yusupov's phone was repeatedly put down when Forum 18 introduced itself. Press Secretary Shovkat Hamdamov and "Expert analysis" Section Head Sobitjon Nasimov both claimed Forum 18 had phoned a wrong number.

"This is absurd – he wouldn't have fought with anyone, still less on his last day"

Forum 18 (16.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ToeZko> - Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience Kamol Odilov was given an extra prison term in late January, just days before he completed his six-year prison term handed down to punish him for exercising his freedom of religion or belief. He and his fellow Muslims had met to discuss the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Prison authorities claim he got into a fight. "This is absurd – he wouldn't have fought with anyone, still less on his last day," a Muslim familiar with the case told Forum 18 News Service. In 2015 a three-year extra prison term was handed to another Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience from Bukhara, Botir Tukhtamurodov, after he too had completed a six-year prison term. Officials told Tukhtamurodov and his relatives that he will not be freed until the authorities get back his brother Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov from Russia, where he sought refuge in 2010. The Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for Uzbekistan's prisons – refused to discuss the situation of these prisoners of conscience with Forum 18.

Just as his six year prison term was due to expire in late January, Uzbekistan's authorities imposed a further prison term on Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience Kamol Odilov. "Kamol's parents arrived at the camp near Tashkent on 1 February to collect him at the end of his sentence, but officials told them that on the last day he had got into a fight," fellow Muslims told Forum 18 News Service. "This is absurd – he wouldn't have fought with anyone, still less on his last day."

Odilov marked his 38th birthday in labour camp on 10 February, about two weeks after the new sentence was handed down. Forum 18 has been unable to find out which court sentenced Odilov, the length of the extra sentence or the Criminal Code Article he was sentenced under.

In 2015, another Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience from Bukhara, Botir Tukhtamurodov, had his term of imprisonment extended. The authorities sentenced him to an extra three years' imprisonment in labour camp, fellow Muslims told Forum 18. Forum 18 has been unable to find out when or where Botir Tukhtamurodov was tried and given a further sentence, or what Criminal Code Article he was sentenced under.

Officials told Botir Tukhtamurodov and his relatives that he will not be freed until the authorities get back his brother Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov from Russia, where he sought refuge in January 2010. "This has left his parents in a very difficult position as they love both their sons," a fellow Muslim told Forum 18.

For prisoners the authorities wish to keep in prison after their sentences expire, officials often bring extra charges under Criminal Code Article 221. This punishes "Disobedience to the legal orders of the administration of punishment institutions or other obstruction to the administration in performing its functions by a person serving a penalty in institutions of confinement, if the person has been penalised with confinement to a solitary cell or to

a prison for violation of penal security regulations within one year". Punishment is imprisonment of up to three years, with longer additional prison terms for "especially dangerous recidivists" or those originally sentenced for "especially serious crimes".

Extradition sought

Bukhara City Court ordered Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov's arrest on 22 April 2010 for alleged membership of a religious "extremist" organisation Nurjular (Muslims who read the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi) and distributing religious "extremist" materials. He was accused under Uzbek Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 3a and Article 244-2, Part 1. Unable to find Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov, the Uzbek authorities sought his arrest internationally.

The Russian authorities arrested Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov in August 2010 and sought to extradite him to Uzbekistan. Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov then applied for refugee status in Russia, which Russia's Federal Migration Service initially denied.

Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg to protect himself from extradition to Uzbekistan, fearing that he would face torture if returned there (Application No. 21762/14). The Court told Russia in March 2014 that he "should not be expelled or otherwise involuntarily removed from Russia to Uzbekistan or another country" while his case there was considered.

In its final judgment on 12 February 2015, the ECtHR ruled that there was no longer a need to consider Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov's case as, on 4 September 2014, the Russian authorities had renewed his temporary refugee status in Russia for a further year.

At the same time, the ECtHR expressed its continuing concern about any possible extradition to a country where torture is feared, pointing to Article 3 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ("No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment").

"The Court reiterates that expulsion by a Contracting State may give rise to an issue under Article 3, and hence engage the responsibility of that State under the Convention, where substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the individual concerned, if deported, faces a real risk of being subjected to treatment contrary to Article 3," the ECtHR noted in Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov's judgment.

International obligations

In July 2015, after considering Uzbekistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed concern about "unlawful arrests, detentions, torture and ill-treatment and convictions on religious extremism related charges of independent Muslims practising their faith outside registered structures", as well as "arrest for 'illegal religious activity', detention, fines and prison sentences" for others who practice their faith "outside registered structures".

"The State party should guarantee in practice the freedom of religion and belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief," the UN Human Rights Committee insisted in its report (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4).

The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), which Uzbekistan acceded to on 28 September 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third

person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Uzbekistan has grave international obligations under the CAT, including the obligation to arrest, try under criminal law and if found guilty severely punish officials guilty of torture.

Long prison sentences

Both Odilov and Botir Tukhtamurodov were among an estimated more than 100 readers of Nursi's works to be given long prison sentences to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Botir Tukhtamurodov was among a group of Muslims arrested in Bukhara on 22 December 2008. He was formally arrested on 30 December 2008 and placed in pre-trial detention. He was sentenced to a six-year prison term at the end of a trial of nine men in Bukhara in April 2009. Their appeals were rejected in June 2009.

Given that the sentence of imprisonment is deemed to run from the date of arrest, Botir Tukhtamurodov should have completed his sentence at the end of 2014.

Odilov was arrested in Bukhara in January 2010. He was among nine Muslims who read Nursi's works sentenced in Bukhara in June 2010. He was given a six-year prison term.

Thousands imprisoned, but no official comment

There is reliable information that thousands more Muslims are imprisoned, usually on accusations of belonging to terrorist, "extremist" or banned organisations, or on other charges which may appear to relate to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. But the nature of the Uzbek "justice system", in which the planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed, makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else – knows how many of these prisoners are guilty of involvement in violence or some other crime, are disliked by the authorities or an official for some other reason, or are "guilty" of being devout Muslims who take their faith seriously. Indeed, Forum 18 has spoken to police who arrested people but were unaware of any offence the people arrested had committed. The only reason for such arrests was that a higher official had ordered someone to be arrested without stating why.

Among the many other prisoners of conscience imprisoned for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief is Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov. When his sisters recently visited him in prison "he sounded like he was saying his last goodbye to his sisters because he thought the end of his life is coming", relatives told Forum 18. Meanwhile officials have told Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov that he will not be released on parole this summer as he had hoped.

No one at the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for prisons – would discuss the situation of any of the prisoners of conscience punished for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Abdulaziz (who did not give his last name), who presented himself as Deputy Head of the Chief Directorate, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February that he cannot discuss anything over the phone, and asked Forum 18 to send its questions in writing.

Still imprisoned

Among the Muslim readers of Nursi's works still imprisoned is 43-year-old Ikrom Merajov. He was given a nine-year sentence in Bukhara in April 2009 in the same trial where Botir Tukhtamurodov was sentenced.

Merajov's sentence was left unchanged on appeal in June 2009.

Merajov is being held in a labour camp near Chirchik in Tashkent Region. "Ikrom is able to write letters and to receive visits from his parents and other relatives," a Muslim who knows him told Forum 18.

Imprisoned?

Tajik citizen Shukhrat Sharipov was arrested by the Uzbek authorities on 7 February 2010 as he entered Uzbekistan after being deported from Kazakhstan, local journalist Shuhrat Ismailov wrote on the Centrasia.ru website on 17 February 2010. Uzbek customs officials had found Sharipov carrying "illegal" religious literature. Among the nine religious books in Russian, Kazakh, Turkish and Arabic, were three related to Nurjular, including one by Nursi, as well as "The Light of Islam" by Sheikh Ali ibn Saab al Husaini.

Prosecutors began preparing a criminal case against Sharipov under Article 246 ("contraband", carrying a 5 to 10 year term of imprisonment for "religious extremist" materials) and Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations", carrying a 5 to 15 year term of imprisonment).

Forum 18 has been unable to establish if Sharipov was brought to trial and sentenced or, if he was, whether he is still imprisoned.

Sharipov – who would now be 34 – moved to work in Kazakhstan in October 2009, where he worked on a food stall. However, he was detained for working in the country illegally and ordered deported from Kazakhstan by Almaty's Specialised Administrative Court on 18 January 2010, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Other Nursi prisoners of conscience amnestied

In contrast to the added sentences imposed on Odilov and Tukhtamurodov, at least 16 other Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for reading Nursi's works have been amnestied in recent years.

Alisher Jumaev, Bobomurod Sanoev and Jamshid Ramazonov were amnestied in spring 2012. Freed early in April 2012 was Abdulaziz Dadahonov. Muzaffar Allayorov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov, Yadgar Juraev, Abdukakhkhor Alimov, Mirshod Kakhkharov and Mirzo Allayorov (Muzaffar's brother) were amnestied in spring 2014. Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown) were freed in February 2015 under a Presidential prisoner amnesty declared in December 2014, and had served most of their long jail terms.
