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Muslims' long prison terms, Protestants' short terms

A Tashkent court jailed eleven Muslims who met to pray and discuss their faith for up to six years. Several testified about torture (including officers' threat to rape the wife of one in front of him). The court ignored the testimony. Three Protestants were given 15-day terms.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rWRCUR> - A court in the Uzbek capital Tashkent handed down prison sentences of five to six years on 26 May to eleven Muslim men for meeting in homes and teahouses to discuss their faith. The men met for joint prayers between 2008 and 2016, but the only time when all eleven met together was in spring 2008.

One of the eleven, Khusnuddin Rizayev, a 39-year old professor of Tashkent's State Pedagogical University, had already been sentenced in a separate case on 25 January. That sentence has been combined with the sentence handed down on 26 May.

"All the defendants appealed against the verdict on 15 June," Shohida Inagamova, mother of one of the defendants, Khusnuddin Inagamov, told Forum 18. "The appeal will be heard on 30 June at Tashkent City Court." However, Rizayev's lawyer Dilmurod Akhmedov told Forum 18 he has not been informed of any date for the appeal hearing.

The eleven men are all being held in the Interior Ministry's Detention Centre No. 1 in Tashkent.

The authorities claim that in a 2008 meeting, some of the men spoke against then President Islam Karimov, talked about the need to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Uzbekistan, and planned to overthrow the government. They also accused them of supporting a banned radical Islamic movement and of listening to recorded sermons of an Imam the authorities "disappeared" 22 years ago.

However, Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights defender, dismissed these accusations. "The defendants only ate, rested, and prayed together," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 15 June. He complained that the case is "fabricated, and the authorities produced no evidence except the confessions extracted from the defendants by torturing them during the investigation."

Relatives complain that the Court refused to hear the defendants' testimony of torture in detention, including threats that officers would rape the wife of one of the prisoners in front of him.

Officials of various state agencies involved in imprisoning the eleven men, including the Anti-Terrorism Police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Prosecutor General's

and Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office, and Judge Iroda Mukhamedova of the Tashkent Court, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 between 15 and 16 June.

In late April, the authorities in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'iston] autonomous region gave short prison terms to three Protestant men.

Lengthy prison terms for praying together and discussing religion

Judge Iroda Mukhamedova of Tashkent City Criminal Court on 26 May gave lengthy prison terms to eleven Muslim men, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. They will serve the sentences in ordinary regime labour camps. The months each spent in pre-trial detention will count towards their sentence. Tashkent's Mirobod District Prosecutor Alisher Karimov was the State Prosecutor in the case.

The defendants were deemed guilty for listening while they worked together to CDs of Imam Mirzayev's sermons, which the authorities deem "extremist". The prosecution claimed the sermons contained calls to "establish Islamic religious rules" in Uzbekistan.

The eleven Muslims Judge Mukhamedova sentenced (full name, date of birth, Criminal Code Articles, term of imprisonment, date sentence is counted from):

1. Davron Yuldashevich Fayziyev; born 20 October 1977; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
2. Latip Talipovich Yusupov; born 22 December 1970; Criminal Code Articles 159, Part 3, Point a; 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 1 October 2016).
3. Khusnuddin Tokhtamurodovich Rizayev; born 9 December 1977; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 25 August 2016).
4. Dilshod Khikmatullayevich Kamilov; born 9 July 1975; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
5. Abdurashid Abdulkhayevich Rashidov; born 16 October 1972; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
6. Khusnuddin Abdukhakimovich Inagamov; born 24 March 1973; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 6 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
7. Afzaljon Azatovich Urunov; born 26 March 1973; Criminal Code Articles Article 159, Part 1; 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 and a half years' imprisonment (counted from 13 October 2016).
8. Ravshan Mukhamadovich Mirzayev; born 2 May 1969; Criminal Code Articles 159, Part 1; 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 and a half years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
9. Sobirjon Sotvoldiyevich Khasanov; born 25 November 1970; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).
10. Bakhadyr Bakhtiyarovich Sadykov; born 18 October 1971; Criminal Code Articles 244-1, Part 2; 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 13 October 2016).
11. Ravshan Bakhtiyarovich Sadykov (Bakhadyr Sadykov's young brother); born 24 September 1976; Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1; 5 years' imprisonment (counted from 3 November 2016).

The NSS secret police charged the defendants under Criminal Code Articles 159 (offence against the Constitutional order), 244-1 (production, storage, distribution or demonstration of religious extremist materials containing threat to public security and public order) and 244-2 (creation of, leadership, participation in extremist religious, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organisations).

Part 1 of Article 159 (public calls or dissemination of materials containing such calls for illegal change of the State order) carries punishments including a fine up to 600 times the minimum monthly wage, or deprivation of liberty of between two and five years, or imprisonment of up to five years.

Part 2 of Article 159 (violent acts aimed at impediment of the activity of State organs) carries punishments including a fine of 200 to 600 times the minimum monthly wage, or deprivation of liberty between three and five years or imprisonment from three to five years.

Point (a) of Part 3 of Article 159 (acts punishable under Part 1 or Part 2 of Article 159 committed repeatedly or by a dangerous recidivist) carries punishments of imprisonment for between five and ten years.

Part 2 of Article 244-1 carries punishments including a fine of 300 to 400 times the minimum monthly wage, or arrest for up to six months, or limitation of liberty of between three and five years, or deprivation of liberty of between three and five years.

Part 1 of Article 244-2 carries punishments of deprivation of liberty of between five and fifteen years.

Part 2 of Article 241 (failure to report about or concealment of serious crimes) carries punishments including a fine up to 75 times the minimum monthly wage, or correctional labour of up to three years, or deprivation of liberty of between two and five years or imprisonment of up to five years.

The former NSS secret police officer Azimjon Urunov faced charges under Criminal Code Article 241, Part 2 (failure to report about or concealment of serious crimes). However, charges against him were dropped on 23 May during the penultimate hearing of the trial and he was freed from pre-trial detention. The Court questioned him as a witness in the case.

For Rizayev, this was the second sentence in 2017. He was among a group of four men who went on trial under Judge Davron Norboyev at Tashkent City Criminal Court on 12 December 2016. On 25 January 2017, the Judge sentenced Rizayev to five and a half years' imprisonment, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. He was convicted under Criminal Code Article 216 (illegal organisation of public or religious organisations) and Article 241. The May trial consolidated the two sentences into one.

First Judge removed

The initial trial of the eleven Muslims began on 27 February under Judge Azim Khudoyberganov. After complaints from the lawyers and defendants that the Judge "was drunk during the hearing and violated procedure", he was removed from the case, Ikramov told Forum 18.

After the appointment of Judge Mukhamedova, the trial was completed in three short hearings, each one lasting between two and three hours. "The Court rushed to carry out the orders from the executive authorities," Ikramov complained.

No answers

The official who answered Judge Mukhamedova's phone on 15 June confirmed her name to Forum 18 but when asked about the case, claimed she was not Mukhamedova. She asked Forum 18 to call back later and then put the phone down. Officials between 15 and 16 June kept telling Forum 18 that the Judge was busy, and asked to call back later.

Phones at the headquarters in Tashkent of the NSS secret police went unanswered between 15 and 16 June.

Botyr Kudratkhojayev headed Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office in 2016 and signed the indictment against the eleven Muslims. On 7 June 2017 he was appointed Uzbekistan's Deputy Prosecutor General. Reached on 16 June, Kudratkhojayev refused to talk to Forum 18. He put the phone down when asked about the case. Subsequent calls on 16 June to the Prosecutor General's phones went unanswered.

NSS Investigator Major Sh. Markayev had prepared the indictment, which was then endorsed by the Chief of the NSS Investigation Department Colonel Oleg Busygin.

Alisher Maksudov, Chief Assistant of the Prosecutor of Tashkent City, declined to discuss the case. "We cannot inform you about the case over the phone. Please, send your questions in writing," he told Forum 18 on 16 June. However, he claimed that the defendants had not been tortured. "I know the case, and nothing of the sort happened."

Asked about the case on 16 June, Tashkent City Police officials (no names were given) referred Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Mukhammad from the Anti-Terror Police, who investigated the case. They did not give his last name.

Officer Mukhammad identified himself to Forum 18 on 16 June. But when asked about the case and why he and his colleagues tortured Rizayev while interrogating, he replied, "I do not understand your questions," and put the phone down. Called back he claimed to Forum 18 that it is a "wrong number".

Arrests, searches

As seen from the indictment, the eleven Muslims worked in groups of between four and six renovating flats in Tashkent and elsewhere in Uzbekistan between 2008 and 2016. They also met separately in homes and teahouses to pray together and discuss religion.

The NSS secret police accused the eleven of being members of the Muslim radical movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, disseminating its extremist ideas and plotting to overthrow the government.

Khusnuddin Rizayev - a professor of Tashkent State Pedagogical University - was arrested and put in pre-trial detention on 8 August 2016. The other ten Muslims were arrested in October and November 2016.

In autumn 2016 officers searched the flats of Mirzayev and Fayziyev, according to the indictment seen by Forum 18. They seized from the two a computer hard disc and DVDs containing religious materials. The indictment claims that the materials contained teachings of the Hizb ut-Tahrir radical Muslim movement.

Officials accused Mirzayev of "making efforts to organise a Muslim religious community to spread his religious beliefs which he learned from Andijan Imam Abduvali Mirzayev."

Abduvali Mirzayev, an Imam in Andijan, "disappeared" at Tashkent Airport in 1995 with his assistant and was never seen again. Many Muslims have since been punished for having recordings of his sermons.

Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18 that the authorities also searched the family home and seized his son's books and computer. "They found nothing illegal."

Why were Muslims arrested?

Tashkent City Anti-Terror Police initially opened the case on 5 August 2016 against Abdugofur Usmonov, according to the indictment. Uzbekistan's Prosecutor General handed the case on 13 October 2016 to the NSS secret police for further investigation.

Usmonov had been arrested in February 2016, Khusnuddin Rizayev's father, Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18 on 15 June. Using Usmonov's statements, police arrested Khusnuddin Rizayev on 8 August. Usmonov admitted to Police that he "spoke against the government and shared his complaints with my son," Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18.

In early 2016, prior to Usmonov's arrest, Usmonov and Khusnuddin Rizayev worked together renovating a flat. As well as teaching drawing and graphic arts at Tashkent State Pedagogical University, Rizayev also worked for clients on interior design of flats.

"Soon after the conversation, my son warned [Usmonov's] father about his statements, and told him to stop his son from making such statements," Tokhtamurod Rizayev told Forum 18. He lamented that the Court did "not take this into account and argued that he should have informed the Police but did not do so."

Azimjon Urunov, a former NSS officer (and brother of one of those convicted, Afzaljon Urunov), was accused of knowing about the alleged activities of the group and not reporting to the authorities. The eleven men had gathered in Urunov's summer house in Tashkent Region's Zangiota District in the spring of 2008.

"It is no surprise to me that a former NSS man was involved in the group," Tashkent-based human rights defender Ikramov complained to Forum 18. "Only he of the twelve was released."

"Nothing illegal in their activity"

Tokhtamurod Rizayev defended his son, saying that he is a Muslim believer but was "not involved in religious propaganda and did not give religious literature to others." He lamented that his son was "supposed to receive his Doctor of Science degree in 2016 but alas could not."

Khusnuddin Rizayev's lawyer Akhmedov explained to Forum 18 that "since 2008 they [the eleven men] had regular gatherings for prayers but Rizayev met with them on one or two occasions." He was adamant that the defendants did "not commit anything criminal and there is no evidence of anything criminal in their activity."

Rizayev actively shared his Muslim beliefs on social media

Khusnuddin Rizayev – who is married with three children – actively shared his Islamic beliefs on his Facebook account. As seen by Forum 18, he wrote on the importance for Muslims of reading the Koran, saying namaz prayers, being righteous, being good towards others, being kind, not avenging evil, not being jealous and not being lovers of high positions in society.

Rizayev also shared that Muslims should be kind toward strangers, refugees, orphans, the needy, poor and hungry especially during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. He maintained one should not be preoccupied with one's own table of food when breaking the fast.

Yasin Ismadiyarov, Dean of the School of Professional Education of Tashkent State Pedagogical University, told Forum 18 on 15 June that Rizayev "worked in a different faculty until the summer of 2016 when their faculty was subordinated to us." He explained that "I do not know him well but I did not hear bad reports about him from his colleagues."

Nurlan Tashimov, Head of the Department of Drawing and Graphic Arts where Rizayev worked, told Forum 18 on 15 June that he and his colleagues were "shocked when they heard that Khusnuddin was arrested." He described Rizayev as a "good and responsible man who always fulfilled his duties on time". He added that "He never shared any radical ideas with us. We are still confused and shocked about this arrest."

Tashimov told Forum 18 that neither he nor his colleagues participated in the trial. But at the request of Rizayev's father his Department provided the Court with a positive reference letter.

Khusnuddin Rizayev's father lamented to Forum 18 that the authorities "made my son criminally responsible for no crimes he committed." He said that "His only guilt was that nine years ago in 2008 ago he visited Urunov's summerhouse where they swam in the pool, ate and prayed together."

Previously convicted of Hizb ut-Tahrir membership

As seen from the indictment, Yusupov, Inagamov, Rashidov, Kamilov and Fayziyev were convicted in the early 2000s for allegedly being members of the banned radical religious movement Hizb ut-Tahrir. They were all released between 2004 and 2007. Inagamov, sentenced to nine years in prison for alleged extremist religious activity in 2001, was pardoned and released in 2004.

Inagamov's mother, Shohida Inagamova, told Forum 18 on 15 June that "I cannot say anything about his imprisonment in 2001, but this time he was arrested for no reason." She was adamant that her son is "innocent, and has committed no crime, nor even planned anything against the government."

She explained that Inagamov's lawyer asked the Court "what exactly crimes my son committed but the Court ignored it."

"All these years after he was released from prison in 2004, he did not even attend mosque for fear of the authorities," she lamented. "My son's only guilt is that he continued his namaz prayers."

Court refused to investigate torture and violated procedures

Inagamova complained to Forum 18 the Court did "not investigate the torture of my son and others by the Police and secret police to make them confess they were guilty."

Both Police and NSS secret police officers during the investigation "subjected each defendant to severe torture to make them confess they were guilty", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18. He recounted that during the hearing Rizayev told the Court that "Anti-terror Police Investigators Otabek and Mukhammad (last names not known) beat him up and threatened him that unless he confesses his guilt they will bring his wife and rape her in front of him."

Rizayev lost consciousness while telling this to the Court, Ikramov added. An ambulance was called, and the Court adjourned for thirty minutes. After the Court hearing resumed, Judge Mukhamedova and Prosecutor Karimov did "not react at all to the facts of torture". Ikramov expressed to Forum 18 that "Perhaps they live in the dark ages, and according to their mentality this is all normal."

The Court also ignored the testimony of Ravshan Sadykov, one of the defendants, about his torture during the investigation, Ikramov added. "Police choked him by putting a plastic bag over his head, and electrocuted him in his earlobes to make him confess he was guilty."

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine", the United Nations Committee Against Torture found in 2007.

Ikramov added that the Court also did "not hear the six witnesses who were supposed to give testimonies of the defendants' innocence."

Three Protestants given short prison terms

Meanwhile in late April, the authorities in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region gave short prison terms to three Protestant men – Marat, Joldas and Salamat (last names not given). A court in Nukus, Karakalpakstan's regional capital, handed down the 15-day administrative prison terms to punish them for meeting for worship in a home.

The three Protestants were freed from custody ahead of time on 5 May, Protestants from Nukus, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in mid-May. The men were "starved" while in NSS secret police custody, independent news agency centre1.com reported on 28 April, based on sources from Nukus.

"There is a wider persecution [of Protestant Christians] going on in Karakalpakstan now," Protestants told Forum 18. "Many believers were dismissed from their jobs." Because of the fear of the authorities, they did not want to discuss with Forum 18 the jailings or other cases.

The authorities have refused state registration (and therefore the right to exist) to all religious communities in Karakalpakstan except mosques of the state-backed Muslim Board and one Russian Orthodox parish. Officers frequently raid and punish local Protestants.

Deportation, fines, Bible and Koran seizures

A Russian was deported with no court decision and home-owner fined after police raided a Tashkent Christian meeting. Officials told a Muslim seeking back her seized Koran manuscript that police cannot be prosecuted. Tashkent Airport customs seized pilgrims' Korans. A court ordered New Testament texts destroyed.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (17.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rqMVC0> - In early April, a Russian Protestant was deported back to Russia with no court decision to punish her for attending a Christian meeting in a flat in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. Police raided the meeting, seizing Christian books and other items, possibly with information from an informer. The home-owner was fined.

Police officers and customs officials frequently seize individuals' religious literature, claiming it is "illegal".

A Muslim woman in Kokand is still campaigning to get back a valuable centuries-old Koran manuscript seized from her in 2006 which Court Bailiffs claim was "lost" after being stored in a safe. Officials told her the Police Investigator who originally confiscated the "lost" manuscript cannot now be brought to trial.

In Navoi in April, police raided a Christian family, seizing religious literature and other items. One officer told the home owner she may be fined.

In Urgench, police search the bags of a local Christian at the market, seizing a copy of a booklet with three New Testament letters. In late March a judge fined her and ordered the New Testament booklet destroyed.

In Nukus in March, a Judge fined a local Protestant for having Christian materials in his home when police raided it. He ordered the book and discs confiscated.

At Tashkent Airport in January, customs officers seized Korans and other Muslim literature from pilgrims returning from Mecca.

On the land border with Turkmenistan in May, customs officers stopped two visitors from Turkmenistan from leaving Uzbekistan after they discovered Christian materials – including the Bible – in their mobile phones. The two women were fined and then had difficulty leaving the country as their Uzbek visas had by then expired.

Tashkent: Raid

On 24 March seven officials, including three uniformed police officers, broke into the home of Yelena Potorochina, a Protestant in Tashkent's Yakkasaray District, Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 18 April. At the flat five Protestant women were meeting to discuss the Christian faith, led by a Russian citizen Tatyana Bezhenova. Potorochina's son was also in the flat during the raid.

The officials included the Head of Yakkasaray District Anti-Terrorism Police Azamat Nabirayev, and Yakkasary District Police Major Ramiz Fozilov with Police Inspectors Toirzhon Pakhrudinov and Zhamoliddin Karshibayev. They searched Potorochina's home and confiscated four Christian books including two New Testaments, 12 notebooks with personal notes written by the participants, a laptop computer, a desktop computer's hard disc, and a digital camera.

Raids on private homes to search for religious literature of all beliefs (including Muslim, Christian, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna texts) are common in Uzbekistan. Any printed or electronic literature found is confiscated and those who possess the texts punished.

The officials also confiscated Bezhenova's Russian passport. On 30 March Bezhenova left written complaints at the Presidential Administration and Yakkasaray District Prosecutor's Office. When she also visited the Russian Embassy officials refused to help her and advised her to hire a lawyer.

Yakkasaray District Police Inspector Karshibayev did not want to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 11 May, and referred the inquiry to District Anti-Terrorism Police Head Nabirayev. Asked why police raided Potorochina's home and confiscated private property, he claimed to Forum 18 that "everything was returned to her".

Told that the Court ordered the computer to be destroyed, Inspector Karshibayev replied: "I am not going to discuss the case with you. You can send questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Fine, Russian deported

On 3 April Judge Timur Kasymov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court on 3 April found Potorochina guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 240, 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"). He fined her 7,488,750 Soms, or 50 times the minimum monthly wage. He also ordered the destruction of Potorochina's laptop computer.

However, on 17 April Tashkent City Appeal Court reduced Potorochina's fine to 748,875 Soms or five times the minimum monthly wage.

On 4 April the authorities deported Bezhenova back to Russia, but without a legally-required court order. She also received her passport back that day.

Asked on 12 May why he fined her and ordered her computer to be destroyed, when her "offence" was to exercise her freedom of religion and belief stated in the Constitution, Judge Kasymov told Forum 18: "I cannot discuss my decisions with third parties". He did not answer when Forum 18 asked why Bezhenova was deported without the legally-required court order.

Tashkent: Informer?

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that they suspect that a woman who attends their meetings for worship may be an informer for the authorities. They note that she was the last to enter the flat, left the door unlocked "against security measures", and hung a towel from the window of the flat before the raid. "We think that the towel may have been a sign to the authorities that we were having a teaching session," Protestants stated.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police carries out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during meetings for worship, and the recruitment of spies within communities – including among leaders.

Kokand: Centuries-old Koran confiscated by police – sold abroad?

In 2006 police in Kokand [Qo'qon] in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Region raided the home of a Muslim woman, Rahbarkhon Adylova. Officers confiscated a centuries-old Koran manuscript that is thought to be worth an extremely large sum of money. It has been in her family for many generations, and in Soviet times she was approached several times to sell the Koran for an extremely high price. She refused all these approaches.

On 23 June 2006 Judge P. Mamatusmonov of Kokand Criminal Court ordered the Koran manuscript to be returned to Adylova. (Forum 18 has seen the Judge's decision.) Yet when Adylova went to reclaim her Koran, Court Bailiffs told her that it had allegedly been "lost" from the safe where it had been stored.

Adylova told Forum 18 on 16 May 2017 that when she realised the Koran was "stolen from the safe after the Court decision in 2006", she complained for several years to various authorities with no success. In early 2017 she complained to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

via his website and started a one-person picket in front of the Presidential Administration's building in Tashkent.

Adylova said that an official from the office of Presidential Advisor Tursunkhan Khudaybergenov then called her, saying that he would meet her on 26 April. Khudaybergenov was in 2006 the Head of Fergana Regional Police when the Koran was confiscated. When Adylova complained to Khudaybergenov about this in 2006, she said that he publicly claimed that she was "trying to blackmail" his officials.

Adylova and her daughter were met on 26 April 2017 not by Khudaybergenov, but by officials of Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Administration. "I don't remember the name of the official, but he told us that they will see what they can do but did not promise anything," Adylova stated.

Presidential Administration officials who would not give their names refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Advisor Khudaybergenov on 12 May. One official claimed that "we cannot give you any information. You can send a letter to the Foreign Ministry".

Human rights defenders and others have told Adylova that the Koran "may have been sold abroad", and that "it is unlikely that she will be able to recover it", independent news agency centre1.com reported on 28 April.

Kokand: Impunity for police

After Adylova's 26 April meeting in Tashkent, Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the then in 2006 Police Investigator Alisher Khuzhamkulov. He had confiscated the Koran from Adylova.

However, the Prosecutor's Office did "not invite me to record my testimony or to attend the court hearing," Adylova told Forum 18. Fergana Regional Prosecutor Muzaffar Abdurakhmanov then informed her in writing that Investigator Khuzhamkulov had been amnestied, because the time period for criminal liability had expired.

Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office officials, who would not give their names, refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Regional Prosecutor Abdurakhmanov on 12 May.

"The authorities incriminate people many years after events for a stolen mobile phone, but for a valuable Koran they give themselves the excuse of the expiry of the term of criminal liability," Adylova complained. "The authorities have promised many times that they will help find the book and return it to us, but up until now nothing has been done."

There is within Uzbekistan a culture of impunity for officials carrying out unjust and oppressive actions.

Navoi: Raid and confiscations

On 6 April three police officers and two other officials in Navoi [Nawoiy] in the central Navoi Region raided the home of Alla Dobronravova, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church. Two of the police officers were Mirkomil Usmonov of Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Kamil Yakubov of Navoi City Police. Police also brought with them the Chair and one employee of the local mahalla committee (local residential administration) as witnesses of the search and confiscation.

Mahalla committees are a key part of the state's structures of repression.

The five officials arrived at 6 pm and claimed they were carrying out a "passport check". Those within the flat during the raid were Dobronravova, Olga Tsirkunyak (her daughter), and Ivan Tsirkunyak (her daughter's husband). The police presented a search warrant from Navoi City Prosecutor written in Uzbek, which no-one present understood.

Police confiscated Christian materials, including five books, two songbooks, two DVD discs, and two personal notebooks with notes, Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 April. Police told the family that these items will be sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for "expert analysis".

Such allegedly "expert analysis" is often used to justify violations of freedom of religion and belief.

Officers also told Dobronravova that she may be punished 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"). Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and any items used to manufacture or distribute them.

Asked about the case, Navoi Regional Police on 12 May told Forum 18 that CID Officer Usmonov was "not available" and referred it to Captain Abdumalik Sadikov from the CID, who also oversees cases repressing freedom of religion and belief. Sadikov admitted that officers had raided Dobronravova's home and confiscated books and other items, but refused to comment. He asked Forum 18 to talk to Officer Usmonov.

Usmonov on 12 May at first admitted who he was, but when Forum 18 asked about the case he claimed it was "a wrong number". He then put the phone down.

Urgench: Market arrest, confiscation, fine, destruction

On 18 February police in Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region, including Police Inspectors Nizomboy Khudoyorov and Ulugbek Ruzmetov, stopped Dilorom Khudoybergenova at the town's open-air market. The officials brought her to the Police Station within the market, and searched her bags full of groceries. As well as the groceries, the police found a book containing the three short New Testament texts the First, Second, and Third Letters of John with commentaries in Uzbek.

Khudoybergenova was then taken to Urgench City Police Station, where she was questioned by CID Major Shavkat Bekjanov. He wrote a report of the incident, and confiscated the book containing the First, Second and Third Letters of John, as well as Khudoybergenova's mobile phone.

When Khudoybergenova objected to this and told Major Bekjanov that she will write to the President, Bekjanov "began shouting at her and warned her that he will open a criminal case if she complains". Having been arrested at 5 pm, Khudoybergenova was kept at the Police Station until 9 pm before being released.

Major Bekjanov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 12 May. Asked why police stopped Khudoybergenova when she was shopping and confiscated the Christian book from her, and why he threatened her with a criminal case, he replied: "I do not understand your questions." He then put the phone down.

On 28 March Judge Alisher Kahharov of Urgench City Criminal Court fined Khudoybergenova 14,977,500 Soms, or 100 times the minimum monthly wage. She was convicted 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").

The Judge also ordered the destruction of the Biblical book of the three letters of John, and the confiscation of Khudoybergenova's mobile phone. Religious literature – including the Bible and Islamic texts – is often ordered to be confiscated and destroyed.

Azamat Khaytboyev, Judge Kahharov's Assistant, claimed to Forum 18 the Judge is "in a seminar", and referred Forum 18 to Judge Alisher Avetov, "who can answer your questions". But numerous calls to Avetov's phone the same day went unanswered.

Nukus: Fine

On 27 November 2016 police raided the flat of Bakhytbergen Abdikarimov in Nukus in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous region. Officers confiscated Christian materials and a DVD of his wedding. They then took him to a police station where he was questioned for several hours and then released.

While under arrest and repeatedly later, police tried to pressure him into "confessing" that he had broken 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").

On 16 March 2017 Nukus City Criminal Court fined Abdikarimov 1,497,750 Soms, or 10 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2. The Court also ordered the confiscation of a Christian book entitled "Social Concept of Evangelical Christian Churches of Uzbekistan", as well as three Christian DVDs.

Aman, who would not give his last name, the Head of Nukus Court's Chancellery, on 15 May refused to discuss the case. Forum 18's subsequent calls to the Chancellery on the same day went unanswered.

Nukus City Police also refused to discuss the case on 15 May.

Tashkent airport: Korans, other Islamic books confiscated from pilgrims

In January customs officials at Tashkent Airport confiscated Korans and other Muslim books from pilgrims returning from the umra pilgrimage to Mecca (known as the "lesser pilgrimage"), a Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals – who witnessed the confiscations - told Forum 18 on 10 May. The pilgrims had bought the Korans and other books in Mecca.

"I do not know if or what punishments the pilgrims received since I do not know them," the Muslim said. "I myself have when in Mecca not bought any religious literature, as I was afraid that I could get into trouble."

Customs officials routinely search travellers and confiscate any religious literature they find, including on mobile phones. The punishments given for the "crime" of having such texts can be severe, and torture can also be used against those who possess religious literature.

The state-controlled procedure for selecting umra pilgrims is the same as for the haj pilgrimage, on which severe restrictions are imposed. Local Muslims also state that officials demand bribes or "unofficial payments" which more than double the cost of pilgrimages.

Khorezm: Arrests, fines, confiscations at border with Turkmenistan

In May, two visiting female Protestants from Turkmenistan were fined in the western Khorezm Region, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Uzbek customs officers searched the Protestants as they prepared to cross back into Turkmenistan, and

discovered Christian materials in their mobile phones. The materials included sermons, songs, and the Bible in Uzbek. The two women's passports were confiscated, preventing them from leaving, as were their mobile phones.

Over the next few days officials summoned the women for questioning each day, often for several hours at a time. They were then fined about 14,000 Soms each under the Administrative Code.

The authorities prevented the two women from leaving Uzbekistan on the date they had expected, which was when their Uzbek visas expired. So the women had to extend their Uzbek visas, so that they would not be punished even more for being in the country without the required documentation.

Police excuses for literature seizure raids

"Anti-terrorist measures", "pre-Novruz inspection", "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer are excuses police gave to raid homes and seize religious literature. Police checking for "banned" sermons have not yet returned all computers seized from Muslim college students.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (30.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ot3EY4> - In at least five further known cases since the beginning of the year, police in and around Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent have raided homes and seized Christian and Hare Krishna literature. Police used excuses for the raids, such as "anti-terrorist measures", a "pre-Novruz inspection", a "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer. In Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan, officers seized computers from students of a Muslim college, hunting for "banned" sermons.

After the raid on a Hare Krishna devotee's home, the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent told her that devotees can have only one copy of the religious faith's five main books at home. Any other books have to be held at their state-registered temple.

Police officers in other raids have told individuals that they are not allowed to have any religious books at home.

After a raid on a Baptist home in mid-March, police tried to pressure a church member to spy for them.

Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court in December 2016 refused to overturn large fines on 20 Protestants for holding a meeting to celebrate harvest festival.

Begzod Kadyrov, responsible for work with non-Muslim religious organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to discuss the recent raids on Protestants and the Hare Krishna devotee and confiscations of their literature. "We cannot hold a telephone conversation with you," he told Forum 18 on 30 March, asking it to send questions in writing.

The Committee official responsible for Muslim communities claimed that all the computers seized from the Muslim students in Andijan had been checked and returned.

Literature censorship, raids, seizures, destruction, punishments

Uzbekistan enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. 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. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law.

One Tashkent-based religious believer told Forum 18 that they were so scared about the quantity of religious literature in their home that they took it out into the yard of their block of flats and burnt it.

The harshest punishments for the possession of banned religious literature, including on electronic devices, are normally imposed on Muslims. For example, in late 2016 courts imprisoned two more foreign citizens – for five years and three years - for having Islamic sermons on their mobiles as they entered Uzbekistan. One was tortured. Three Tashkent Muslims were given suspended prison sentences, after the father of one was "severely tortured".

As well as widespread seizures of religious literature in raids, customs officers routinely seize such literature or electronic devices containing religious material from people returning to the country.

Tashkent: pre-Novruz inspection, literature seizure

Two officers of Tashkent's Yashnobod District Anti-terrorist Police raided the home of a Baptist couple, Konstantin and Susanna Binkovsky, mid-morning on 11 March. The officers "claimed that it was part of a regular inspection for security reasons on the eve of the Novruz holiday," Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 30 March. Novruz is the Persian New Year celebrated in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the region.

However, as soon as the officers entered the Binkovskys' home, they asked the couple whether they had religious literature. "When they saw a family Bible on the table and a notebook with notes, they seized them immediately," Baptists complained to Forum 18. "Then without a warrant and making records they checked the bookcase and seized all the Christian books." Officers did not provide the couple a copy of the Police report.

Officers then took the husband to Yashnobod District Police Station. His wife later decided to go there also. "Officers questioned both of them, and told them that they will send the literature for expert analysis." Officers asked the husband to "cooperate with the Police, but he refused."

Then on 27 March, after discovering that fellow Baptists had published information about the raid and literature seizure on the internet, the same officers came back to the Binkovskys' home. They threatened the couple that they should not tell others, including fellow Baptists living abroad, about the police actions. Officers again questioned the couple.

Yashnobod Anti-terrorist Police Chief Jabbor Rizkulov insisted that the Police acted lawfully. Asked on 30 March about the reasons of the raid and confiscation of Christian literature, including a Bible, he refused to comment. "You are calling from a foreign country, but this is Uzbekistan with its own laws," he told Forum 18 on 30 March.

Asked why - if the Police acted lawfully - officers threatened the Baptists not to tell their fellow-believers, Rizkulov responded: "Send any further questions through the Foreign Ministry." He then refused to talk to Forum 18.

Tashkent: Bibles, phones, computer seized under "passport regime inspection"

Three Police officers, who included Anti-terror Police Officer Tuychi Azizov and a local Police Officer who gave his name as Batyr (who did not give his last name), raided the home of Protestant couple Andrei and Tursuna Li in Tashkent's Uchtepe District in the early evening of 28 February.

"Officers broke into the flat and conducted an unauthorised search under the guise of a passport regime inspection," Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18.

Officers confiscated two Bibles in Russian, two Bibles in Uzbek and a Concordance (Bible index) in Russian. They also seized two mobile phones and a laptop computer. The Bibles were bought from Uzbekistan's officially registered Bible Society, and "their distribution in the territory of Uzbekistan is legal", the Protestants pointed out.

Jamshid Tillabayev, Chief of Uchtepe District's Criminal and Anti-terrorism Police, confirmed the confiscation. "The confiscated materials are still being examined," he told Forum 18 on 30 March. "When we have finished the examination and religious expert analysis we will return the materials," he claimed.

Asked why Police seize Bibles, a holy book for Christians, Tillabayev did not say. "Call me back later, I'm busy now," was all he said.

Almalyk: Looking for alleged drug dealer in Baptists' flat?

Major Mamur Saparov, Anti-terror Officer of Tashkent Regional Police, Captain Gairat Abdullayev Chief Investigator of the Region's Pskent District Police, Captain Sh. Makhmudov of the same Department, Shokhrukh Safarov, the local Police Officer and two more unidentified officers, broke into the home of Zinaida and Pyotr Brislavsky on the morning of 27 February, "violating their privacy".

The couple are members of the officially registered Baptist Church in the town of Almalyk [Olmalik], 50 kms (30 miles) south-east of Tashkent.

The Police confiscated 40 Christian books, including a Bible, a New Testament, Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, and an antique book on Russian Orthodox monasteries published in 1895. Also confiscated were 40 copies of the Baptist journal "Fraternal Herald", 45 audio-cassette tapes containing Christian songs, and 15 CDs and DVDs with Christian materials.

Officers presented to the Brislavskys a search warrant signed by Prosecutor Botyr Norov of Pskent District that day. The search warrant was approved by Investigator Captain Abdullayev.

The search warrant said that an unidentified person, who travelled in the same car with Kutbiddin Abdulakhatov, both of whom are suspected of possessing illegal narcotic drugs, escaped the Police and hid in the area where the Baptists' flat is situated.

Based on the words of a witness, the unidentified person is "either hiding in Zinaida Brislavsky's private flat" (her address was then added) or "he may be storing his private items in the same flat."

The Baptists complained that the search warrant is "falsified because among many violations of the Criminal Procedure Code, it does not indicate when the alleged criminals were apprehended. No names or positions of officers involved in the arrest are indicated."

The Baptists insisted that the search warrant was used "as a pretext to raid" the Brislavskys' flat. The Police "came up with a new idea now, to make the Baptists accomplices of drug dealers!"

"Interestingly, officers demanded the couple hand over the 'missionary' literature," the Baptists noted. "That is to say, they were no longer interested in the fugitive and drugs."

Akmal (who refused to give last name), Deputy Prosecutor of Pskent, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 30 March or put it through to Prosecutor Norov. Asked if Forum 18 could talk to Prosecutor Norov on the reasons of a search warrant to look for a drug dealer in the Baptists' home, he claimed: "He is busy." When Forum 18 persisted with its questions, the Deputy Prosecutor put the phone down. Subsequent calls to the Prosecutor's Office on the same day went unanswered.

Asked about the case on 30 March, Officer Kholmurod (who refused to give his last name) of Tashkent Regional Anti-terrorism Police wrote down the details and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. "I will find out for the reasons for the inspection and will answer you," he said. Called back, he refused to talk to Forum 18. "Send a letter to the Interior Ministry," he said and put the phone down.

Captain Abdullayev of Pskent Police also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. "I cannot talk to you over the phone. Please, come to our Police Station, and I will explain everything to you." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Police's fake witnesses at raid

Eleven officers of Tashkent's Sergeli District Police on 8 February raided the home of Alijon and Natalya Khatamov, members of the officially registered Baptist Church. "Police officers broke into the flat at 5 pm and conducted an unauthorised search," fellow church members complained to Forum 18.

Police confiscated 20 Christian books, including a Concordance, Old and New Testament Commentaries, and a Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, all of which were bought from the Bible Society. Police also confiscated Baptist songbooks and a desktop computer's hard disc.

The officers did not include the titles of the books in the records of the confiscation. The police report was also signed by one person who "falsified signatures of two fake names as two witnesses of the confiscation." No exact addresses of the alleged witnesses were given, the report only indicating that they are from Namangan and Kashkadarya Regions. The Police "has used this trick more than once, to make it difficult to verify these witnesses."

The Police sent the literature for "expert analysis" to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Baptists said that they are "expecting fines after the religious expert analysis".

Tashkent: Hare Krishna devotee fined, community warned

In early 2017 police raided the home of a member of Tashkent's Hare Krishna community. Officers seized about 35 religious books and booklets from her, a fellow-devotee, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 27 March. The devotee did not want to disclose details of the case for security reasons but said that the woman was later "warned and punished with a small fine".

The police "seized some 40 books from her flat and sent it for 'expert analysis'," the devotee told Forum 18. "The Religious Affairs Committee later returned her five books, which are our main religious books, to her and handed over the rest of the books to the Temple in Tashkent."

The Committee "warned the community that each believer can only keep in their homes one copy of each of the five main books, while the rest of the officially allowed literature can only be held within the Temple."

The Hare Krishna devotee said that "we have stopped distributing books in the street or other public places since 2008, since the [Religion] Law banned it." They lamented that "Now we realise that we cannot keep at home religious literature other than those five books."

Andijan: Computers seized on suspicion of "banned" sermons

In the eastern city of Andijan, police seized the personal laptop computers from several students of the city's state-sponsored Sayyid Mukhyiddin makhdum madrassah (Islamic secondary school) in late January.

"Officers suspected that the students may have listened to the sermons of Imam Obid Nazarov or other Imams, which are banned in Uzbekistan, or visited some Islamic sites banned in Uzbekistan," Saidjahon Zaynobiddinov, an independent human rights defender, told Forum 18 on 29 March.

Exiled Imam Nazarov was the subject of a 2012 murder attempt in Sweden, for which his family accuse the Uzbek government of responsibility. Individuals have been punished for listening to his sermons, as well as those of Andijan Imam Abduvali Kori Mirzayev (who "disappeared" with his assistant at Tashkent airport in 1995), and former prisoner of conscience and Muslim sports journalist Khairullo Hamidov (who was released in February 2015).

Zaynobiddinov said that people familiar with the case told him that "some students already received back their computers". However, officers are still checking the computers of others.

Andijan Regional Administration officials (none of whom would give their names) between 29 and 30 March refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 or put it through to any officials overseeing local religious organisations.

Officials of the Andijan Department of the state-sponsored Muslim Board did not want to discuss the computer seizures. One official told Forum 18 on 29 March that he "cannot comment on the case." He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials.

Mukhammadbobur Yuldashev, responsible for work with Mosques and Muslim organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 30 March that the computers had been returned to the students on the same day they were seized. Told that parents of some of the students complained that the computers had still not been returned, he repeated his claim.

Asked why the computers were checked, Yuldashev said that the authorities want to make sure that the students do not read or listen to sermons which are banned in Uzbekistan. He confirmed to Forum 18 that Imam Nazarov's sermons are among those banned.

Parents of some of the students whose computers were seized complained to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service in mid-March that it has been "already two months that the Police is checking the computers". They noted that in the meantime their children experience difficulties with doing their homework "since there not enough books in the school library and they have to read materials on the internet." They complained, asking: "Why is it taking so long to return the computers?"

The madrassah director, Nurulla Kadyrov, refused to talk to Radio Free Europe in mid-March. He put the phone down when asked why the computers were seized and why the Police did not return them.

Nukus: Fines for harvest festival meeting upheld

The Supreme Court in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qaraqalpakstan] autonomous republic on 26 December 2016 upheld the large fines given in autumn 2016 by Nukus City Court to a group of twenty Protestants, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

A total of 18 - Nazigul Niyazova, Gulsina Aypova, Altyngul Uteniyazova, Injikhon Khojamuratova, Roza Kazakbayeva, Sveta Ubaydullayeva, Peruza Jenmuradova, Shokhista Jumbayeva, Uzildik Jumashева, Makhmudjan Kasymov, Bagila Uteshova, Salamat Kutlumuratov, Zholdasbay Zhanabergenov, Almagul Edilbekova, Kalbike Allabergenova, Kyzlargul Orazniyazova, Aykan Zhumagaliyeva, Bibiaysha Eshmuratova - were each fined 2,995,520 Soms or 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The other two - Kuvatbay Nurmanov and Aykhan Seytmuratova - were each fined 3,744,400 Soms or 25 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Article 184-2 punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and items used to manufacture or distribute them.

According to the Supreme Court decision, the punishments followed a Police raid as part of "anti-terrorist measures" on the group's harvest festival worship meeting. Officers confiscated personal mobile phones, which contained Christian materials, from most of the group members. They also seized a desktop computer's hard disc from Seytmuratova and a New Testament from Niyazova, as well as other books and notebooks.

The Court decision claims that the Protestants "illegally stored or carried" the Christian materials. The telephones, books and notebooks were not returned.

Religious literature fines and confiscations continue

A car has been confiscated from a Protestant because he did not pay illegal fines for giving religious books away. The books were approved by the Religious Affairs Committee, which apparently changed its mind so as to fine the Pastor. Raids and fines continue.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (10.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lFDDzc> - Bailiffs in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in January confiscated a car from Seventh-day Adventist pastor Andrei Ten because he did not pay an August 2016 fine for giving religious books away. The books had originally been approved by the Religious Affairs Committee, which then apparently changed its mind so as to fine the Pastor. He was denied the chance to appeal against the fine, and an extra fine was imposed for not paying the first fine. The confiscated could be worth more than three times the value of the fines.

In Nukus, police are pressuring a local Protestant to sign a record officers want to dictate admitting to the "offence" of having religious literature in his home.

A total of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses across Uzbekistan are known to have been fined between August 2016 and January 2017 for possessing religious literature and other materials. In the same period, customs officers have confiscated religious books and electronic devices containing religious material from 17 Jehovah's Witnesses arriving in the country.

Severe state censorship

Uzbekistan enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. 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. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law.

The harshest punishments for the possession of banned religious literature, including on electronic devices, are normally imposed on Muslims. For example, in late 2016 courts imprisoned two more foreign citizens – for five years and three years - for having Islamic sermons on their mobiles as they entered Uzbekistan. One was tortured. Three Tashkent Muslims were given suspended prison sentences, after the father of one was "severely tortured".

Car confiscated for unpaid illegal fines

In August 2016 police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police arrested four men riding in a taxi in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. They then confiscated copies of a religious book which the Religious Affairs Committee had in writing stated that, after "expert analysis", was allowed to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

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.

Denied chance to appeal

Pastor Ten has not been given a copy of the 19 August 2016 decision fining him, so denying him a chance to appeal. Neither his 25 August complaint to Olmazor District Court and 28 December cassation appeal to Tashkent City Court were answered, Adventists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 1 February.

Instead Judge Musa Yusupov sent the decision, which had not entered into force, for execution to bailiffs.

Asked why the Judge did this, Aziz Rakhimov, Judge Yusupov's Assistant, on 9 February 2017 claimed that: "I myself gave a copy to Ten three days after the decision". He then declined to discuss the case further.

On 18 January Ten received two letters. The first was a decision to exact the administrative fine imposed in August 2016. The second was a new 19 December 2016 decision imposing an extra fine of 10 times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,497,750 Soms, for failure to pay the first fine. The second fine was signed by Bailiff Imamjan Tuychiyev under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 198-1 ("Failure by a debtor to obey executive orders").

On 19 January Bailiff Tuychiyev with five colleagues broke into the grounds of Ten's home. They waited for Ten, and when he returned home at 8 pm illegally confiscated his car. "Pastor Ten doesn't know where they took the car," Adventists stated.

Bailiff Tuychiyev claimed to Forum 18 on 8 February that "we did everything according to the law". Told that Ten was not given a copy of the original court decision and so could not pay the first fine, and that his complaint and cassation appeals were ignored, Tuychiyev replied: "That's not our problem. You need to ask the court which ordered us to exact the fine."

Told that the market value of Ten's car could be up 30 million Soms, several times the level of the fine, Bailiff Tuychiyev answered: "I am not a market specialist. When he pays the total sum of the fine he can get it back."

Pressure to admit to "offence"

Nine police officers, only one of whom was in uniform, broke into Bakhbergen Abdikarimov's flat in Nukus in the afternoon of 27 November 2016. The police did not have a search warrant, so both their breaking into his home and subsequent search were illegal. Police confiscated one Christian book, three CD and DVD discs - one of which contained a video of Abdikarimov's wedding - and one memory chip, local Protestants who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 2 February.

Police then took Abdikarimov to Nukus Police Station and questioned him for three hours. The unnamed officers demanded that he write a statement they would dictate, in which he would claim to be illegally storing Christian books in his home. Abdikarimov refused to do this and the police then released him.

Since then Nukus Police have been "constantly making phone calls to summoning him to Nukus Police Station", Protestants stated. The police are still trying to force Abdikarimov to sign a police report incriminating himself for allegedly 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").

Major Isak Soliyev of Nukus Police's Criminal Investigation Division refused to discuss the case on 9 February. He asked Forum 18 to call back in one hour, and when called claimed: "We don't know you, and we cannot talk to you over the phone".

Fines follow literature, electronic device seizures

Police raided and searched homes of 43 Jehovah's Witnesses across Uzbekistan for religious literature between August 2016 and January 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. This resulted in the confiscation of 43 publications and electronic devices and 19 Jehovah's Witnesses being fined. A recent example took place in Jizakh Region. Judge Sherzod Peshmirzayev of Jizakh City Criminal Court fined 23-year old Muborak Abdurakhmanova on 22 December 2016 for reading Jehovah's Witness literature. The Judge fined her 20 times the minimum monthly wage or 2,995,500 Soms under Administrative Code Article 184-2, the Court's Chancellery told Forum 18 on 9 February.

Jizakh Regional Administration's official website on 27 January published an article titled "Regret of a woman of thoughtless actions." It instructs readers that "one must not act based on one's impulses but on science and a world view", before adding that: "Wilfulness and thoughtless actions can bring any person like Abdurakhmanova into the court room." The article claims that Abdurakhmanova admitted in Court that she "became interested in Jehovah's Witnesses, and recorded on her mobile phone video-films made by the followers of this sect. She also made notes in her notebook on various religious topics."

Abdurakhmanova "studied the Bible, listened to sermons by Jehovah's Witnesses and sang religious songs for one year", the article said. She "illegally kept" the religious materials in her phone until 18 November 2016, when police confiscated it from her.

A Jizakh Criminal Court Chancellery official (who would not give his name) refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Calls to Judge Peshmirzayev went unanswered on 9 February.

Uzbekistan frequently raids, arrests, fines, and jails people exercising freedom of religion and belief who possess religious literature. For example, two Protestant five-day prisoners of conscience were ordered in November 2016 to pay 15 per cent each of a month's minimum salary as "compensation" for state prison costs.

Customs seize religious literature

Between August 2016 and January 2017, Uzbek customs officers confiscated religious literature and electronic devices from 17 Jehovah's Witnesses entering the country. Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 on 8 February that "in 2006 the Religious Affairs Committee forbade the import of any Jehovah's Witness publications after a shipment of Bibles were confiscated by customs officers.

Asked why the Religious Affairs Committee bans the import of such religious texts, and why customs officers keep confiscating religious literature from people, Begzod Kadyrov, Committee Chief Expert, replied: "Come to our office". He then put the phone down.
