

25 July 2003

UZBEKISTAN: Hare Krishnas the latest target of anti-religious minorities campaign

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In Uzbekistan's campaign against religious minorities regarded as trying to convert Muslims, Uzbek-language Hare Krishna leaflets have been confiscated, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This is even though the leaflets are not illegal under Uzbek law and this action violates Uzbekistan's international commitments. Other victims of this campaign have been Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians. Uzbek officials privately justify their actions to Forum 18 by claiming that in the difficult economic situation, the conversion of Muslims to Christianity or other faiths could provoke riots

On 10 July, police confiscated around 15 leaflets expounding Hare Krishna beliefs from local Hare Krishna believer Nurali Kurbanov., Forum 18 News Service has learnt. An unknown man in civilian clothes came up to him while he was selling Hare Krishna literature at the town market and asked to buy several leaflets from him on the spot. The man told Kurbanov that he would have to come to his house to get the money, and Kurbanov agreed. But the "customer" led him to an official of the Internal Affairs Administration for Navoi region, Shukhrat Khabiyev. Khabiyev confiscated the literature and said it would be sent off for expert analysis.

On 24 July, Khabiyev confirmed these events to Forum 18. "We sent off the literature confiscated from Kurbanov for expert analysis at Uzbekistan's Committee for Religious Affairs, and the response from there was that Hare Krishnas are only allowed to distribute literature in the Russian language, not in Uzbek. Kurbanov will shortly be punished under the administrative code, and will be given a fine for his unlawful activities."

Nowhere in Uzbek law is there a ban on religious minorities preaching in the Uzbek language. However, according to Article 5 of Uzbekistan's law on religion, "actions that aim to convert believers from one confession to another (proselytism), and also any other missionary activity, are forbidden". This article contradicts the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) ratified by Uzbekistan in 1999.

However, the authorities are conducting a particularly harsh campaign against religious minorities that they regard as trying to convert Muslims to their own faith. There is an unspoken directive: "If you are an Uzbek, then you must be Muslims, if you are Russian, you must be Orthodox." The most striking example is the case of a Jehovah's Witness, Marat Mudarisov. A Tatar by birth and a Tashkent resident, he actively preached Jehovah's Witness doctrines. In July 2002 he was arrested by the National Security Service (formerly the KGB), and shortly afterwards a criminal case was brought against him under Article 156 of the criminal code (incitement of national, racial or religious hatred).

Mudarisov's case is disturbing primarily because he was sentenced under the criminal code. However, there have been dozens of cases where pressure has been applied to members of religious minorities simply because they are Muslims by birth. In January 2003 the police burst into a private home in the town of Muinak in Karakalpakstan where two ethnic Kazakhs were reading the Bible. These Protestants were taken to the police station where they were tortured using gas masks, which were put on their heads and their air supply cut off. Officers demanded that they write a confession that they had been preaching the Gospel to each other.

In private conversations with Forum 18, Uzbek officials justify the harsh campaign against proselytism by claiming that, given the difficult economic situation, the conversion of Muslims to Christianity or other faiths could provoke riots (see F18News 16 July 2003, F18News: Uzbekistan - Religious freedom survey).

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603

Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY