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UZBEKISTAN: "All talk about the Constitution and democracy is hypocrisy"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan continues to harass the officially registered Bible Society, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Officials have forced its General Assembly to take place in the open air, after warning churches not to host the meeting. New Bible Society Director Aleksey Voskresensky has left his teaching position at the Tashkent Protestant Seminary under pressure from the state Religious Affairs Committee. State officials have also told Bible Society officials that "it is not necessary to import Bibles into Uzbekistan since there is an electronic version of the Bible on the Internet and this is enough". Bible Society members have complained to Forum 18 that the authorities "are determined to stop import of Bibles in the national languages, and to stop distribution of the Bible in the country. We can see that all talk about the Constitution and democracy in Uzbekistan is hypocrisy". Officials have refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18.

Uzbekistan continues to harass the officially registered Bible Society, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In the latest moves, officials have forced its General Assembly to take place in the open air, after warning churches not to host the meeting. During questioning of Bible Society leaders, officials questioned the Society's existence as a legal religious organisation by stating that some of its founding churches have been closed down. "The officials tried to substantiate their claims by phoning the regional authorities during the meeting – in particular asking whether churches had been closed down," a Bible Society member told Forum 18.

General Assembly forced outside in the cold

The Bible Society's General Assembly was planned to be held on 16 February in a Protestant church in the capital Tashkent, as its offices are too small for a large meeting. However, just beforehand Tashkent Justice Department warned the church not to host the meeting, a source who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "Other churches were afraid after this to host the meeting", Forum 18 was told.

The Assembly went ahead, but in the cold open air, attended by representatives of Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran and Catholic churches from 10 of Uzbekistan's 14 regions. It appointed a new President, new Board members and Aleksey Voskresensky as the new Director. This was to address issues raised by the Justice Ministry, Bible Society members who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18.

Voskresensky had previously, on 24 January, left his teaching position at the Tashkent Protestant Seminary under pressure from the state Religious Affairs Committee.

"I will not answer"

Umid Rasulov of Tashkent City Justice Department on 16 February denied that his Department warned anyone not to host the Assembly. He referred Forum 18 to the Justice Ministry, saying that the Bible Society "was registered by the Ministry. Please talk to them".

Akborhon Nabirayev, Head of the Justice Ministry's department responsible for religious organisations, and Umid Shadiyev, Chief Expert on religious organisations, refused to discuss the matter with Forum 18. Shadiyev's telephone was initially answered by a person who introduced himself as Shadiyev. But when Forum 18 introduced itself, he said it was a wrong number and put the phone down.

After numerous attempts between 11 and 17 February to reach Nabirayev – each Forum 18 was asked to call back – an official of the Justice Ministry on 17 February who answered the phone said Nabirayev could not come to the phone and asked what the question was. When asked why the Bible Society was pressured and is the Ministry planning to strip its registration, the official put the phone down.

Begzod Kodyrov, Leading Specialist of the Religious Affairs Committee on 15 February told Forum 18 that he will "not answer" any questions. "Hundreds of times I have told you to send your questions to the Foreign Ministry," he retorted when asked why the Bible Society was being pressured by the authorities. He then hung up the phone.

Earlier pressure

Bible Society Accountant Natalya Pitirimova was on 12 January fined in her absence for – allegedly - violating procedures for the import of two shipments of Bibles and Children's Bibles in 2008 and 2010. She has also been subsequently questioned by the Customs and National Security Service (NSS) secret police (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542).

Board member Dmitri Pitirimov – in his role leading a children's holiday camp – was in 2009 convicted of evading taxes and involving children in religious activity without their or their parents' consent. He and his co-defendants insist that the charges were fabricated. They were given massive fines in October 2009 and banned from holding any responsible positions for three years (see F18News 7 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384). Appeals against the sentences failed (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

Bible Society President and Director questioned

On 28 December 2010 the Justice Ministry summoned for questioning Oleg Muhamedjanov, the Bible Society's then President and Aleksey Voskresensky, the new Director. Nabirayev and Shadiyev of the Ministry, as well as A. Neymatov and Z. Mahmudov, and one more person who did not introduce himself took part in the questioning, which lasted nearly four hours. A Bible Society member, who wanted to remain unnamed for fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 that Muhamedjanov and Voskresensky were first questioned by the officials one by one, and then they continued to talk to the two together, and then forced them to sign a record of the meeting.

The officials told the Bible Society leaders that Dmitri Pitirimov cannot be a board member, as he had been convicted of a crime. Bible Society members told Forum 18 that Pitirimov has since resigned from the Board.

The officials also disputed the legitimacy of Voskresensky as the Bible Society's new Director, stating that its General Assembly needed to confirm him in office. The General Assembly on 15 February confirmed Voskresensky as the Director.

The officials also questioned the Bible Society's existence as a legal religious organisation, stating that some of its founding churches have been closed down and that the Bible Society did not hold religious ceremonies or services. "The officials tried to substantiate their claims by phoning the regional authorities during the meeting – in particular asking whether churches had been closed down," a Bible Society member told Forum 18. "However, the officials realised that there are still a legal – under the Religion Law – number of founding churches left with official registration."

"No need to import Bibles"

Justice Ministry officials also claimed that: "It is not necessary to import Bibles into Uzbekistan since there is an electronic version of the Bible on the Internet and this is enough," the officials told the two leaders.

Internet censorship, carried out by the NSS secret police, is widespread (see F18News 16 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1422).

"The Bible Society was established by the Churches of Uzbekistan particularly for the production and import of the Bibles," a Bible Society member lamented. "The authorities want to put pressure on us not to do our main task."

Officials told the Bible Society leaders "Do not waste time, waiting for permission to receive the Bible shipments," referring to two confiscated shipments of Bibles (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542).

The officials also warned Muhamedjanov and Voskresensky that they will soon investigate the activity of the Bible Society further. Forum 18 understands that the Justice Ministry has not yet made further inquiries of the Society.

"Talk about the Constitution and democracy is hypocrisy"

Bible Society members complained to Forum 18 that the authorities "are determined to stop import of Bibles in the national languages, and to stop distribution of the Bible in the country. We can see that all the talk about the Constitution and democracy in Uzbekistan is hypocrisy."

The Bible Society was first registered in 1994, and its purpose is to produce or import Bibles for Uzbekistan's Christians. It was re-registered in 1998 under the then-new Religion Law. Before the 1998 re-registration, the Russian Orthodox Church left the Bible

Society as a founding member. However the Catholic Church joined as a new founding member. The latest founding members include churches from eight of the 14 regions of Uzbekistan. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>.

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