

7 April 2005

UZBEKISTAN: Baptist jailed and Bible to be destroyed for "illegal" religious meeting

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Baptist Farkhod Khamedov was sentenced to jail for 10 days and his Bible ordered to be destroyed, for conducting a religious meeting in a private flat, by Judge Turman Tashmetov in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has found. Judge Tashmetov told Forum 18 that the Bible was being held "as material evidence" and had not yet been destroyed. "Khamedov has filed an appeal and his case will now be considered by another judge," he told Forum 18. "That judge will decide what to do with the Bible." Khamedov has appealed against the sentence. Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, claimed to Forum 18 that Judge Tashmetov had made a "mistake" and that "I'm sure that it will be returned to Khamedov once his case is reheard." Uzbek courts have in recent years burnt religious literature confiscated from the homes of Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Baptist Farkhod Khamedov was sentenced to ten days' detention on 14 March by the criminal court in Chilanzar district of the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has found. Judge Turman Tashmetov convicted Khamedov under Article 240 of the Uzbek administrative violations code (which punishes violations of the law on religion) for conducting a religious meeting in a private flat. He also ordered that a Bible confiscated from Khamedov be destroyed.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 4 April, Judge Tashmetov stated that the Bible was currently being held at the courthouse "as material evidence" and had not been destroyed. "Khamedov has filed an appeal and his case will now be considered by another judge," he explained. "That judge will decide what to do with the Bible."

Contacted by Forum 18 on 4 April, Begzot Kadyrov, the chief specialist at the Uzbek government's Committee for Religious Affairs, admitted that Judge Tashmetov's order to destroy the Bible had been a mistake. "Mind you, the Bible wasn't destroyed, and I'm sure that it will be returned to Khamedov once his case is reheard – we will be following it closely."

Kadyrov also maintained that the Christian literature confiscated by customs officers on 7 March would be returned to its Baptist owners if they addressed a statement to the Committee for Religious Affairs (see F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527). 1039 items of Christian literature were seized, including 290 copies of Luke's Gospel, 200 copies of Mark's Gospel and copies of Baptist magazines. There are fears that this literature may be burned by the government.

"That case should not be regarded as religious," Kadyrov claimed. "The Baptists were detained as smugglers - they were trying to bring literature into the country while evading customs. Nevertheless, we are prepared to help them and return the literature." Told of Baptist claims that Bibles have been destroyed by court order on two previous occasions in Uzbekistan, Kadyrov maintained that he personally was aware of only one such instance. "It occurred in violation of the law," he maintained. "We are prepared to consider any evidence the Baptists might submit."

Strict censorship of religious literature is practiced by Uzbekistan, and religious literature confiscated from the homes of Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses has been destroyed under court orders in recent years (see F18News 17 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=527, 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455, 16 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=277 and 9 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=75). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

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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