

# **Religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan**

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## **A World Council of Churches Consultation on Religious Freedom 28 November – 1 December 2011 in Istanbul**

### **Background to the delegation trip in September 2011**

During some years the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) have received alarming reports about violation of religious freedom in Uzbekistan. We have also heard about some problems that the Baptist Union have had with the authorities. In light of that, they decided to send a delegation to Uzbekistan to find out facts, show our fellow believers the support from the larger Baptist family and also try to initiate a dialogue with the authorities in the country handling religious affairs.

### **The delegation and time schedule**

The delegation was formed by Raimundo Barreto, the Director of Freedom and Justice in the BWA, and Christer Daelander, the EBF Religious Freedom Representative. They visited Uzbekistan between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2011. They were also joined by Pavlo Unguryan, a Baptist leader and a Member of Parliament in Ukraine, who was first of all the “door opener” for many of the meetings, because of his many contacts in Uzbekistan.

### **Meetings and talks**

The delegation had a number of important meetings with key persons. Apart from meeting with the Baptist leaders they also met with other religious leaders from the Pentecostal Church, the Orthodox Church in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan and the Bible Society. Meetings were also held with the ambassador of Ukraine, with the project coordinator of the OSCE office (Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe) and with the Chief expert of the State Committee of Religious Affairs, Mr. Behzod M. Kadyrov, to discuss some of the concerns for Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan. Pavlo also arranged a meeting with the ambassador of Ukraine, Mr. Juriy Savchenko.

### **Country background**

Uzbekistan is the second largest country in Central Asia. During the Soviet occupation religion was not allowed before 1943. The three religions accepted from 1943 were Islam, The Orthodox Church and Judaism. From that time The Islamic center in Tashkent – Uzbekistan became the Islamic center for the whole of Central Asia. Since its early days, Christianity has existed as a small minority in the country, and has never had any major influence on the development of Uzbekistan.

Today, in accord with a recent report by the US state Department, 93 percent of the Uzbek population is nominally Muslim, the vast majority being Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. Islam practice in Uzbekistan is not monolithic, and many people adhere to a secularized form

of Islam. Some Muslim minorities have been banned, and others are kept under close scrutiny by the government. Orthodox Christians make for four percent of the population and faces the challenge of the decline in the ethnic Russian population. Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Lutherans, Seventh-Day Adventists, non-denominational Evangelicals and Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews (many of which have immigrated either to Israel or to the US), Baha'is, Buddhists, Hare Krishna's and atheists make for the remaining three percent. According to *Operation World*, only 0.28 percent of the population is Protestant. According to the Baptist Union leaders, there are approximately 5.500 Baptists in the country.

## **The religious freedom situation**

The religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan is complex. The project coordinator of the OSCE explained that the authorities of Uzbekistan will not adapt to the international standard concerning religious freedom since they consider these questions to be purely internal. Nevertheless, the Uzbek Government has signed the International Bill of Human Rights, which obliges it to respect the freedom of religion and belief of its own citizens. The UN Human Rights Council has demanded in the end of 2010 the Government of Uzbekistan to make some changes in its legislation in order to comply with its commitments to the International Convention of Cultural and Political Rights (CCPR). They also expressed concerns about the imprisonments of religious leaders. So far the Government has not responded to these remarks. The OSCE project secretary says that the Government needs to limit the freedom of religious groups in order to minimize the risk of riots and demonstrations which could destabilize the government. If they accepted "Freedom of Peaceful Assemblies", as they have officially done when they became members of the OSCE, this could easily change from peaceful to violent. This is the alleged reason for the restrictions, according to the project secretary.

## **The Baptist Church**

The Baptists whom the delegation talked with mentioned a number of problems they have had with the authorities. First, they said they are not allowed to evangelize the majority population of the country – the Uzbeks. All pastors and local Churches are Russian speaking. Russian ethnics are a minority of no more than five percent of the Uzbek population, and Russian speaking is dramatically declining in the country. Actually there is a law against proselytism, so they are not allowed to spread their faith to anyone with the aim to recruit that person. In order to be legally working in the country the Union, as well as each local church, has to be registered. The Baptist Union is registered, and 20 local Churches as well. Another 30 churches affiliated with the Baptist Union are not registered. Many of them have felt discouraged even to try to get registration. A significant number of local Churches would like to register but cannot comply with the conditions required from them. They need to have at least the names of 100 members listed with, addresses and other contact information. Then they need to get licenses from the local authorities, the fire brigade and the health department. When all the paperwork is in order they can send the application to the State Committee on Religious Affairs, says Mr. Kadyrov, chief expert of that Committee. The local Baptist leader who also met with the Chief Executive informed afterwards that it is

not that easy to get registration. Usually the government officials make unreasonable requests, turning it almost impossible for them to have all the required paperwork.

A couple of years ago the church building of the registered Church of Navoi was demolished because the authorities wanted to build a road. To this day, the road has not yet been built. The congregation is now trying to find means to build a new church. A couple of years ago a Sunday School teacher in the Third Baptist Church of Tashkent was arrested because he was teaching children and they kept him in the arrest for 15 days. In April of 2011 the Second Baptist Church of Tashkent was raided by the police. The accusation was that they had built and were running a Bible School illegally and that they had Uzbek literature in the Church, and that they were printing and selling Christian books illegally. 53,000 books and brochures were confiscated along with computers and a printing machine. Four persons who protested received criminal and commercial charges. Pastor Konstantin, one of the four people, claims that they did not print and sell books at all, only leaflets for the member. The Criminal Charges against the individuals were dropped but the administrative charges, against the church, and commercial charges, against the four individuals, still remain. The four persons have to pay fines of 7,000 US dollars and the Church has to pay 3,000 US dollars. They refuse to pay the fines since they consider themselves innocent, and have appealed to the Supreme Court. Christer asked Mr. Kadyrov where they kept the books, since this is the biggest Baptist library in Central Asia. He said they were not kept at the State Committee, but promised he could help the Baptists to find where they were if they come with an official demand.

### **The Pentecostal Church**

The delegation had the opportunity to meet with the leader of the Pentecostal Church. They have 138 local Churches but only 21 registered. Most of the Churches worship in the Uzbek language. They experience difficulties and are from time to time harassed by the police and it is very difficult for them to receive registration. Many members do not want their names to be mentioned during the process of registration because of fear of reprisals.

### **The Russian Orthodox Church**

The delegation met with the Metropolitan Vikentiy in the Orthodox center in Tashkent. The Metropolitan was recently appointed and arrived on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August this year. Vikentiy has the responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. He said that he regularly will meet with the presidents of these republics and he is open for cooperation in the area of religious freedom.

### **The Bible Society**

We met Halmat Ashirov who is recently appointed as the new General Secretary for the Bible Society. Between 2006 and 2011 they couldn't import any bibles whatsoever. But after being in contact with the State Committee of religious affairs the Uzbek government decided to release a container with Bibles and revoke the fees for having stored the container for five years. Last June the container with 2,800 Bibles, mostly in Russian, was finally released. Apparently, there is no restriction for people to come to the Bible Society and buy Bibles, in Russian, Uzbek or any other language. Even churches or other ecclesiastical bodies can buy bibles and take them to their church members. Next year the first Uzbek translation of the whole Bible will be ready for sale. Halmat said that the restrictions on teaching children and youth in religion is a results of the fear the government have that extremists within the

Muslim Communities could use the camps for other purposes than religion, such as terrorist training.

### **Uzbekistan's International obligations**

The main problem is that Uzbekistan has not put into practice the commitments its representatives have signed as a member country of the United Nations, to comply with the declaration of Human Rights, and the CCPR. Both of these documents clearly express freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in article 18. Uzbekistan is also a member of the OSCE, having consequently signed very strong documents demanding full religious freedom for all. In order to give the appearance of compliance to the treaties and documents the country has signed Uzbek authorities give the local churches the possibility to register, whereas making the procedures for registration too complicated. For instance, the delegation learned that not everyone wants to have their names on the lists of members required by the Committee of Religious Affairs from the churches, fearing that those who have signed up as members risk being harassed. The Baptist World Alliance and the European Federation will continue to make efforts to maintain a dialogue with the State Committee and other relevant institutions in order to facilitate the registration process, but also to contribute to more religious freedom for all in the future.

### **Cases of violation of religious freedom reported by Forum 18 in 2011**

*Thursday 3 February 2011*

**UZBEKISTAN: PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE "RELEASED BUT NOT FREE"**

*Former prisoner of conscience Dmitry Shestakov, who was recently released from a four-year jail sentence continues to be placed by Uzbekistan under the severe restrictions of 'administrative supervision', Forum 18 News Service has learned. Among the restrictions Shestakov faces he has to for one year report to police in person almost every week, he may not be outside his home between 21.00 in the evening and 06.00 in the morning, he may not leave his home town without written police permission, and he cannot visit public places such as restaurants. The term of administrative supervision can be extended, and the punishments for breaking the supervision regime range up to imprisonment for four years. The authorities have refused to explain the reason for the restrictions to Forum 18. "He was released from prison but is not free," a local Protestant complained.*

*Current known long and short-term prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants. The latest two short-term prisoners of conscience are two Baptists jailed for distributing religious literature and carrying communion wine used in worship.*

*Wednesday 9 February 2011*

**UZBEKISTAN: "IT'S OUR SECRET"**

*In Uzbekistan, police in the central Syrdarya Region have raided and are preparing to prosecute members of an unregistered Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. They also confiscated religious literature for "expert analysis", even though it had been bought from the registered Bible Society. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church has spoken of the difficulties his church faces in Uzbekistan, noting in particular a ban on missionary activity and opening Orthodox schools, and inability to get state permission for new parishes. The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss this with Forum 18.*

*Elsewhere, two short-term Baptist prisoners of conscience have been released. Judge Bobojonov as he initially introduced himself, of the court which convicted the Baptists, changed his mind about what his name was after Forum 18 asked him why the Baptists were jailed. Police Major Asliddin Mirzayev - who stopped the two Baptists hundreds of kilometres from his office - refused to explain why he did this. "It's our secret", he retorted to Forum 18.*

*Wednesday 23 February 2011*

#### **UZBEKISTAN: MORE SHORT-TERM PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE**

*The same Tashkent judge who sentenced three Protestants to 15-day prison terms in a late-night hearing in May 2010 again stayed up late on 12 February 2011 to hand down 15-day prison terms on a further three Protestants. Fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage at the same time were ten other Full Gospel Church members, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service. All were punished on charges of holding an "illegal" religious meeting after a police raid on a birthday party in a church member's home. The District Police Chief refused to tell Forum 18 why police under his command staged the raid. Short-term jail sentences of up to fifteen days are frequent punishments for those who conduct religious activity the government does not like. There are also many long-term Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant prisoners of conscience, sentenced for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.*

*Monday 28 February 2011*

#### **UZBEKISTAN: "ALL TALK ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION AND DEMOCRACY IS HYPOCRISY"**

*Uzbekistan continues to harass the officially registered Bible Society, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Officials have forced its General Assembly took take place in the open air, after warning churches not to host the meeting. New Bible Society Director Aleksey Voskresenkiy 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 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.*

*(As reported above this problem has now found a solution – Christer's remark)*

*Tuesday 22 March 2011*

#### **UZBEKISTAN: "ANTI-TERROR" RAID ON OLD PEOPLE'S HOME**

*Six Baptists who led Sunday worship in an old people's home near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent face criminal and administrative charges after an "anti-terror operation" against their service, Baptists told Forum 18 News Service. Asked why the authorities halted the service and harassed participants, deputy police chief Major Sofar Fayziyev - who took part in the raid - told Forum 18: "They could not produce any proof that they had authorisation for their activity." Elsewhere, three Baptists were fined after police raided a Sunday morning church service. As happens frequently, the court verdict ordered the destruction of Bibles and other confiscated Christian literature. And Judge Abdumumin Rahimov who handed a massive fine to a young resident of*

*Navoi for transporting Jehovah's Witness literature insists that "the main purpose of the punishment is not revenge against the offender, but teaching him to respect the law".*

*Friday 15 April 2011*

**UZBEKISTAN: POLICE ASSAULT BAPTIST, IMAMS FIRED, GIFT TO CHILDREN'S HOME A "VIOLATION"**

*Uzbekistan has levied a large fine on a Baptist in the capital Tashkent - who was physically assaulted by police - for giving a children's Bible to a work colleague, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The policeman who assaulted Galina Shemetova denied to Forum 18 that he had done anything wrong. Possibly fuelled by the authorities concerns about the impact of the Arab Spring uprisings for freedom, three Tashkent Muslim clerics who studied in Arab countries have been dismissed from their posts. No reasons have been given for the dismissals, and officials refused to answer when asked by Forum 18 whether the dismissals had anything to do with where the clergymen studied. And the officially registered Zarafshan Baptist Church has been raided and given an official warning for making a financial gift to a local children's home. The raid followed the Church's required filing of its financial statements with the regional Justice Department, who then ordered the raid. Among a list of - disputed - violations found by officials is that a tap did not have a notice with the personal data of the person responsible for the Church's use of water. No officials would tell Forum 18 what will happen to the funds the Church gave the Happiness Children's Home.*

*Tuesday 19 April 2011*

**UZBEKISTAN: RAIDS AND CONFISCATIONS AS STATE WANTS "RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS WHICH WILL STAY QUIET" ?**

*Uzbekistan's NSS secret police with other officials have carried out two raids on an officially registered Baptist church in the capital Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Over 50,000 Christian books, a large quantity of printing and office equipment, and a sum of money personally belonging to one person were confiscated. In contrast to the confiscated literature and equipment, no official record was made of the confiscation of the money belonging to a church member was made. Later, three church leaders and the caretaker were given fines ranging between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary. Officials have refused to give reasons for their actions, but there has recently been a harshening of official actions against the possession and supply of religious literature. One Tashkent Baptist, asked by Forum 18 what might be behind the raids and confiscations, commented: "The authorities are interested in having small pocket-size churches and religious organisations, which will stay quiet and not have much religious activity."*

*Thursday 12 May 2011*

**UZBEKISTAN: APRIL WAS THE CRUELLEST MONTH**

*After a 5 April raid on his home by up to 10 police and secret police officers, Tashkent Protestant Anvar Rajapov was fined 80 times the minimum monthly wage for alleged proselytism, illegal religious meetings and illegal literature, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. Judge Berdykilichev did not "even investigate the case but just signed the hastily and carelessly prepared decision", Protestants complained to Forum 18. The judge ordered that the religious books confiscated in the raid be destroyed, "except for those that can be allowed for internal use of religious communities". A member of Tashkent's registered Baptist church, Konstantin Malchikovskiy, faces up to two years' imprisonment if a criminal case now*

*with prosecutors goes ahead. He is accused of failing to use a cash register to record sales and donations to the church. In late April the congregation itself was given a massive fine for this. Church property was raided twice in April.*

*Tuesday 2 August 2011*

*UZBEKISTAN: "SPIRITUALLY RICH AND FOR FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION" ?*

*An indictment has been filed against a Baptist in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Konstantin Malchikovskiy is accused of not paying in monies from church offerings and book sales.*

*Baptists strongly dispute the charges, describing them as "absurd", and noting that they "violate the Religion Law". They also note that courts have ignored what they describe as "exhaustive proofs of falsification and forgery of documents by the tax authorities". The charges have, as in previous cases, been accompanied by a hostile campaign in the state-run media accusing Baptists among other things of running an "illegal training centre". After attacking work with children, an article claims that Uzbekistan has "created an environment where all conditions exist for children to grow spiritually rich and for freedom of conscience and religion". In other cases, a computer hard disk belonging to a Baptist has been ordered to be destroyed, and a prisoner of conscience on a ten year jail sentence for exercising freedom of religion or belief, Tohar Haydarov, has had his sentence confirmed by the Supreme Court.*

*Wednesday 2 November 2011*

*UZBEKISTAN: DID AUTHORITIES BLOCK RUSSIAN PATRIARCH'S VISIT?*

*A planned visit by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill - expected to have begun today (2 November) - appears to have been obstructed by the Uzbek authorities, Forum 18 News Service notes. Some believe the Uzbek authorities were unhappy over the Moscow Patriarchate's decision in July to change its structures in Central Asia and appoint a new bishop to Tashkent without consulting with or gaining the approval of the Uzbek authorities. The Orthodox Diocese, now part of the Central Asian Metropolitan Region, has not yet been able to re-register under its new structure. However, an Orthodox priest in Uzbekistan has told Forum 18 that the Patriarch's visit will take place between 23 and 25 November. Meanwhile, fines and prosecutions of Protestants continue.*

*Monday 7 November 2011*

*UZBEKISTAN: NEW HAJ PILGRIMAGE, SAME OLD RESTRICTIONS*

*The Uzbek authorities have again this year imposed severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in this year's haj pilgrimage, now underway in Saudi Arabia. Only 5,080 out of a potential quota of about 28,000 travelled to Mecca. About as many pilgrims travelled from Kyrgyzstan as from Uzbekistan, more than five times more populous. An official of one Sergeli District mahalla (neighbourhood), with between 3,000 and 7,000 residents, told Forum 18 News Service that "our mahalla will be able to send pilgrims only in 2012. Several people are on the waiting list but maybe only one will go." As before, an "unwritten instruction" banned would-be pilgrims under the age of 45, officials of a local mahalla committee in Tashkent told Forum 18. Pilgrims faced official screening, while secret police officers reportedly accompany the pilgrims. An Imam outside Tashkent, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained that "unofficial payments" more than doubled the cost of the haj. "The*

*number of applicants would be much, much higher if the cost was not so high," he lamented to Forum 18.*

Stockholm the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2011  
Christer Daelander