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UZBEKISTAN: Senior Tashkent official denies "campaign" against religious believers

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Despite launching a sweeping new crackdown on all aspects of religious life in the capital Tashkent - involving many state agencies checking up on religious leaders, the finances and activity of religious communities and the places where they meet - the Deputy Head of the city administration has vigorously denied that this is anything more than routine. "No special measures are being deployed," Anvar Ahmedov assured Forum 18 News Service. "There is no campaign against religious believers." But religious believers are worried, especially as the measures are also designed to halt all unregistered religious activity (which the authorities regard as illegal) and come on top of already tight controls. Officials "will control everything except our thoughts and our personal life," one Christian told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

The administration of Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent has launched a sweeping crackdown on religious activity in the city, requiring a range of government agencies to check up on all aspects of the life of all the city's religious communities and report by 17 January on what measures they have taken to "secure stability in the religious and social/spiritual sphere". "These measures will lead to check ups and control on religious organisations from the Justice Ministry at the top down to local mahalla committees," one Christian source, who preferred not to be identified, complained to Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent in early January. "They will control everything except our thoughts and our personal life."

However, Tashkent's Deputy Hokim (Administration Chief) Anvar Ahmedov, who chaired the meeting that adopted the measures and is responsible for their implementation, vigorously denied that they are anything more than routine verification that religious organisations are abiding by the law. "No special measures are being deployed," he told Forum 18 from the city administration on 11 January. "There is no campaign against religious believers."

Uzbekistan already has very tight restrictions on all aspects of religious life. All unregistered religious activity is banned (in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments), while many religious communities that are eligible are arbitrarily denied registration. Building new places of worship is all but impossible and publishing and importing religious literature is difficult and subject to tight restrictions. Sharing one's faith with others is banned (see F18News 20 April 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546>).

The Tashkent Christian, who pointed out that in law religious communities are separate from the state, did not object to "reasonable" checking up on religious communities: "We have nothing to hide." But the source said religious believers did not trust that the measures would be fair and would not be applied in a prejudiced way.

The measures were decided at a 16 December meeting of the hokimyat (administration), of which Forum 18 has received the six-page Russian-language minutes which were approved the following day and designated for "official use". The meeting chaired by Deputy Hokim Ahmedov, whose responsibilities include overseeing religious affairs, was attended by U. Hasanbaev of the Presidential Administration, Shukhrat Ismoilov, deputy head of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, and numerous city officials.

"At present, inadequacies in the activity and documents of religious organisations hit one in the eyes," the minutes claim. Officials complain that some religious communities meet on land that does not belong to them while others have built or extended places of worship without approval. They complain that religious books, audio and video tapes and CDs are produced and sold without permission. "The unregistered holding of religious ceremonies by religious communities and missionary events testifies to the weakening of control by officials of state agencies and social guardians."

Given what it regards as widespread disregard of the laws on religion, the Hokimyat, the Religious Affairs Committee and the Justice Ministry jointly drew up a range of measures to check up on all aspects of the life of religious communities. Working groups have been set up on a city and local level, while local administrations are to "uncover" the extent of registered and unregistered religious activity. Local administrations have until 17 January to draw up a "passport" for each religious community with information derived from a questionnaire, and must gather information about the leaders and bank accounts of each religious

organisation.

Working groups must immediately inform the city Hokimyat, Justice Ministry and the Public Prosecutor's Office of any "illegal religious organisations" they discover and themselves take (unspecified) measures to halt their activity.

Committees that run local mahallas (city districts) must step up their information-gathering about "official and unofficial" religious activity and pass on a report each Friday to the city Hokimyat. "Preventive Inspectors" of the Interior Ministry are to step up their scrutiny of the work of Islamic and non-Islamic religious organisations and check that it complies with the law. The city's Interior Ministry branch must likewise report each Friday. All religious leaders and employees of religious organisations must be checked to ensure that they have personal residence registration in Tashkent, otherwise (unspecified) "legal measures" are to be taken against them.

The Fire Service is to check that all premises used by religious organisations meet fire-safety standards, while the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service too must check up such premises. The Tax Inspectorate is to ensure that no illegal trade in religious books, audio and video tapes and CDs takes place, including at markets and around metro station entrances, while the City Commission on Production, Duplication and Sale of Records, Audio and Video Tapes and CDs is also to take measures to stamp out the trade. The Architecture Administration and the Land Registry are to check up that religious organisations are legally using land and buildings. Any non-Islamic religious community renting or using a building transferred from designation as a home is to have a special report drawn up with "proposals" (which remain unexplained).

Officials are instructed to pay special attention to unregistered religious organisations they discover, halt such activity as well as any missionary activity they uncover.

The document noted that 114 Muslim communities and 34 non-Muslim communities are now registered in Tashkent. Forum 18 has been unable to discover how many of these have already been visited by officials of the various city agencies. Ahmedov told Forum 18 that so far no agencies have reported to him the conclusions of their investigations.

But he rejected any suggestion that the investigations into every one of the city's religious communities by such a range of city agencies was intrusive. "Who said we are doing something bad? What should we do if any organisation is breaking the law?" he asked Forum 18. "What's wrong if we check that religious organisations meet fire safety standards? The state has the right to regulate the activities of religious organisations, but no-one is controlling their internal life."

Begzot Kadyrov of the government's State Committee for Religious Affairs said he had heard nothing about the Tashkent measures, although the committee's Deputy Chairman had been present, and referred all enquiries to Ahmedov. "Each of the country's regions - and Tashkent city counts as a region - has a Deputy Hakim whose responsibilities include religious affairs," Kadyrov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 11 January. "They have every right to issue such local decrees." He said he did not know if other regions have adopted similar measures.

Meanwhile, Pastor Aleksandr Zakharov, who leads the Fores Full Gospel congregation in the Bakhor mahalla of Tashkent's Mirobad district, has been punished for allowing church members to meet in his home, Full Gospel sources told Forum 18 on 11 January. On 4 January about fifteen guests came to wish him a happy Christmas and New Year when police officers and officials of the mahalla committee arrived. After they had drunk tea with the guests they demanded that Zakharov write a statement explaining why the guests were present and ordering him to report to the police station the following morning. When he arrived there he was sent to the Mirobad criminal court.

The judge at the court claimed to Zakharov and his lawyer that his religious affiliation had no bearing on the case, but fined him 5,000 sums (29 Norwegian kroner, 4 Euros or 4 US dollars) for failing to obey an official order. The judge was unable to answer Zakharov's request to explain what specifically he had done wrong. "It appeared that the judge somehow had to bring someone to court and to responsibility," the Full Gospel representative told Forum 18.

The church was banned from meeting at the end of October and has reluctantly been forced to halt its worship services (see F18News 11 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686>). After the ban was imposed, police repeatedly visited Zakharov's home to warn him not to receive any guests. They refused to explain why they would not allow him to do so. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths 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=546>

For an outline of what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see F18News 16 June 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586>

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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