



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Uzbekistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, the Government continued to restrict these rights in practice. The Government permits the operation of what it considers mainstream religions, including approved Muslim groups, Jewish groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various other Christian denominations, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists. Uzbek society generally tolerates Christian churches as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks; the law prohibits or severely restricts activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction.

There was a decline in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. A number of minority religious groups, including congregations of a variety of Christian denominations, had difficulty satisfying the strict registration requirements set out by the law. As in previous years, Protestant groups with ethnic Uzbek members reported operating in a climate of harassment and fear. Law enforcement officials raided and harassed some registered groups, several of which were subsequently deregistered and closed. The Government continued its campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups suspected of extremist sentiments or activities, arresting numerous alleged members of these groups and sentencing them to lengthy jail terms. Many of these were suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a banned extremist Islamic political movement. The Government pressured the banned Islamic group Akromiya (Akromiylar), especially in Tashkent and Andijon, with those actions spilling over into violence and deaths in Andijon in May 2005. The Government generally did not interfere with worshippers attending sanctioned mosques and granted approvals for new Islamic print, audio, and video materials. During the period covered by this report, the Government announced a release of an unknown number of prisoners of conscience as part of a large-scale amnesty. The number arrested remained below the levels reported in 1999-2001. A small but growing number of "underground" mosques operated under the close scrutiny of religious authorities and the security services. Mosques operating without registration are technically illegal and operate only with the indulgence of the local government. Although mosque attendance in some locations declined for a short time after the May 2005 violence in Andijon, overall attendance has risen significantly since 2004, and even more sharply since May 2005.

The generally tolerant relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, neighbors, family, and employers often continued to pressure ethnic Uzbek Christians, especially recent converts and residents of smaller communities. On at least two occasions during the period of this report, sermons against missionaries and Uzbeks who convert from Islam were noted. Unlike in previous years, there was only one report of individuals being charged with the distribution of HT leaflets, which often contain strong anti-Semitic rhetoric, during the period of this report.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy is actively engaged in monitoring religious freedom and maintains contact with government and religious leaders and human rights activists. The embassy sponsored exchange and educational programs designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom. The programs included the three-year University of Washington partnership program for Cultural and Comparative Religious Studies and Community Connections exchange programs on the topic of Islam in a Religiously Diverse United States. The Government closure of the Tashkent office of the U.S. government-funded International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) has hindered administration of its program on Cultural and Religious Pluralism in Uzbekistan. The Government also closed two of the embassy's other program-implementing organizations during the period of this report, ABA/CEELI and Freedom House, whose human rights programming included components on protecting religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 172,742 square miles, and an estimated population of 27.3 million. International experts believe the population has sustained a loss of 2 to 3 million people in recent years due to the growing trend of labor migration from Uzbekistan to neighboring countries, Russia, South Korea, the Middle East, and the United States. Approximately 80 percent of the population is ethnic Uzbek; 5.5 percent Russian; 5 percent Tajik; 3 percent Kazakh; 2.5 percent Karakalpak; and 1.5 percent Tatar. There are no official statistics on membership in various religious groups; however, it is estimated that 88 percent of the population is nominally Muslim. Approximately 9 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, though this percentage steadily declines as the number of ethnic Russians and other Slavs remaining in the country decreases. A growing number of Hanafi Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents actively practice their religion. Outside of Tashkent, Muslim believers may now outnumber nonbelievers. During the period covered by this report, mosque attendance has noticeably increased, particularly among younger men, who tend to constitute the majority of worshippers. The remaining 3 percent of the population includes small communities of Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas. In addition, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews remain in the country, concentrated in the cities of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. At least 80,000 others have emigrated to Israel and the United States since 1991.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted these rights in practice. The constitution also establishes the principle of separation of church and state. The Government prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements.

Although the law treats all religious denominations equally, the Government shows its support for the country's Muslim heritage by funding an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. As in prior years, the Government provided logistical support for 5,000 selected Muslims to participate in the Hajj, but the pilgrims paid their own expenses. The Government controls the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (the Muftiate), which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials. Kurbon Hayit and Roza Hayit are holy days that are also considered national holidays.

On June 22, 2006, President Karimov signed into law a series of amendments concerning religious literature. An amendment to the Administrative Code, Article 184-2, punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of materials of religious content" with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage for individuals, or 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage for officials of organizations, together with confiscation of the materials and the "corresponding means of producing and distributing them." A new article of the Criminal Code, Article 244-3, addresses the same offense, punishing those already convicted under the corresponding article of the Administrative Code with a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage, or corrective labor of up to 3 years. Other changes introduced simultaneously to the Criminal and Administrative Codes punish the production and distribution of "literature promoting racial and religious hatred."

On December 28, 2005, President Karimov signed into law amendments to both the Criminal Code (Article 217 Part 2) and Administrative Code (Article 201), increasing fines for repeated offenses of violations of the law on religious activity, such as illegal meetings, processions, and ceremonies. The fines are now 200 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage of \$8 (9,500 soum), under the Criminal Code and 50 to 100 times under the Administrative Code, raised from 50 to 75 times and 5 to 10 times respectively.

The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 Religion Law) requires all religious groups and congregations to register, and provides strict and burdensome criteria for their registration. Among its requirements, the law stipulates that each group must present a list of at least one hundred citizen members to the local branches of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), thus suppressing the activities of those groups seeking to worship outside the state-sanctioned system. This provision enables the Government to ban any group by finding technical grounds for denying its registration petition. The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), under the Cabinet of Ministers, oversees registered religious activity. New mosques continued to face difficulties gaining registration, as did those closed previously that re-applied.

To register, groups also must report in their charter a valid legal address. Local officials, on occasion, have denied approval of a legal address to prevent religious groups from registering. The MOJ has also cited this requirement in explaining local officials' decisions. The Jehovah's Witnesses' Tashkent congregation had its registration application denied on these grounds. The Jehovah's Witnesses Ferghana congregation encountered problems renting property when a new city administration cancelled its rental agreement. Some groups, such as the Tashkent International Church, have been reluctant to purchase property without assurance that their registration would be approved. Others claim that local officials arbitrarily withhold approval of the addresses because they oppose the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. Even the Architecture Administration and Land Registry must approve the construction buildings for religious entities.

Some Christian groups applied for registration at local, regional, and national levels and either received a denial or no official answer during the period covered by this report, including the Mir (Peace) Presbyterian Church in Nukus, the United Church of Evangelical Christians/Baptists in Tashkent, the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Andijon, the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. In May 2005 the MOJ deregistered Emmanuel, once the only registered Protestant church in Nukus, in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan and ordered it to close. The Greater Grace Christian Church in Samarkand has temporarily suspended its five-year quest for registration. Some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, did not apply for registration because they did not expect local officials to register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, have reported that they prefer not to bring themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously does not meet legal requirements. There are a few groups that refuse on principle to seek registration because they challenge the Government's right to require registration.

As of June 30, 2006, the Government had registered 2,224 religious congregations and organizations--an increase of 24 from 2,200 recorded in July 2005. Mosques, Muslim educational institutions, and Islamic centers comprised 2,042 of the total registered, an increase of 27, while the number of registered Christian groups decreased by 3. The 182 registered minority religious groups include 59 Korean Christian, 36 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 21 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 10 Seventh-day Adventist, 8 Jewish, 5 Roman Catholic, 6 Baha'i, 3 Lutheran, 4 "New Apostolic," 2 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 Krishna Consciousness group, 1 Temple of Buddha, 1 Christian "Voice of God" Church, and 1 Armenian Apostolic.

A 2003 decree of the Cabinet of Ministers outlining a change in registration requirements for international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) restricted the activities of faith-based entities. Partly on the basis of the new requirements, the Government denied accreditation or visas to more than a dozen employees and volunteers from various faith-based organizations during the period covered by this report. Statements by government officials, as well as documents disseminated to the NGOs by the MOJ, indicated that the Government intended the new requirements, in part, to curtail the activities of international NGOs that proselytize as part of their charitable activities.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 Religion Law) provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state, and the right to establish schools and train clergy; however, the law also severely limits religious activity. It restricts religious rights that are judged to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, bans religious

subjects in public schools, prohibits the private teaching of religious principles, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. The CRA must approve all religious literature. Article 14 of the law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except "those serving in religious organizations." Authorities did not appear to enforce this provision during the period covered by this report.

The Criminal Code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those that are not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups, such as the Islamic political party HT, Tabligh Jamaat, and other groups branded with the general term "Wahhabi" that are banned altogether. The code makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison, to organize an illegal religious group or to resume the activities of such a group after it has been denied registration or ordered to disband. In addition, the code punishes participation in such a group with up to three years in prison. The code also provides penalties of up to twenty years in prison (if the crime results in "grave consequences") for "organizing or participating" in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. In the past, courts often ignored the distinction between illegal and prohibited groups, and frequently convicted members of unapproved Muslim groups under both statutes. In contrast with past years, there were few reports of such practices during the reporting period.

The Criminal and Civil Codes contain stiff penalties for violating the Religion Law and other statutes on religious activities. In addition to the prohibited activities that include organizing an illegal religious group, the law also proscribes persuading others to join such a group and drawing minors into a religious organization without the permission of their parents. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The law prohibits religious groups that do not have a registered central administrative body from training religious personnel. There are six such entities that may legally train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law permits no private instruction and provides for fines for violations. There are ten madrassahs (including two for women), which provide secondary education. In addition, the Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher educational instruction. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, thus enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. The curriculum in the madrassahs and Islamic Institute is oriented towards those planning to become imams or religious teachers. This is not the case with the government-funded and established Islamic University, where students pursue religious studies from a secular perspective, although, in practice, graduates from the Islamic University have been appointed imams after graduation, which provides another mechanism for the Government to directly influence mosques.

The Government restricts Shi'a Islamic education by not permitting the training of Shi'a imams inside the country, and not recognizing such education received outside the country. There is no officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam. An increasing number of imams informally offer religious education; although this is technically illegal, local authorities rarely took legal action. The Russian Orthodox Church operates two monasteries (one for women, one for men) and a seminary and offers Sunday school education through many of its churches. The government Jewish school operates in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy District. Other religious faiths offer religious education through their religious centers.

The law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools, the private teaching of religious principles, and the teaching of religion to minors without parental consent. Nevertheless, a course called "Comparative Religion" is taught at the Andijon Foreign Languages Institute, and likely other institutes around the country, for students of university age. On June 26, 2006, according to the newspaper *Novy Vek*, authorities closed a religious school for children in Tashkent Province and charged two teachers with involvement in a religious extremist organization. The report alleged that the school was providing radical religious education to young children. In March 2005, authorities closed an unlicensed Islamic kindergarten in Ferghana Province, according to the newspaper *Voice of Uzbekistan*.

In 2003 a panel of experts convened by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), reviewed the 1998 Religion Law and associated criminal and civil statutes and concluded that they were in violation of the international norms for religious freedom. The OSCE submitted a number of recommendations, including lifting the bans on proselytizing and private religious instruction and decriminalizing activities of unregistered religious organizations. The Government, through the CRA, agreed to consider the ODHIR recommendations but took no action by the end of the period covered by this report.

The main laws under which authorities charge citizens for religious activity are Article 159 (anti-constitutional activity); Article 216 (illegal establishment of public associations or religious organizations; Article 216, Section 2 (violation of legislation on religious organizations, including proselytism); Article 244, Section 1 (production and distribution of materials which create a threat to public security and public order); and Article 244, Section 2 (establishment, direction of, or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organizations) of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code. Citizens charged under these sections (particularly Article 244, Section 2) are frequently charged with being members of the extremist Islamist political organization HT, which promotes hate and praises acts of terrorism, although HT maintains that it is committed to nonviolence. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature and websites call for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia, to be replaced with a worldwide Islamic government referred to as the Caliphate.

Because HT is primarily a political organization, albeit one motivated by religious ideology, and because it does not condemn terrorist acts by other groups, authorities' actions to restrict HT and prosecute its members are not a restriction on religious freedom per se (although the failure to observe due process and other norms constitute human rights violations). However, in thousands of cases authorities have asserted HT membership based solely on outward expressions of devout belief or have made false assertions of HT membership as a pretext for repressing the expression of moderate religious belief. Estimates from credible sources suggested that as many as 4,500 of the estimated 5,000 to 5,500 political prisoners being held in detention were members of the political movement HT. It is difficult to estimate precisely the number of persons arrested on false charges of extremism and difficult to know how many of those were under suspicion because of their religious observance. As in previous years, authorities arbitrarily arrested a large percentage of those taken into custody on charges of extremism.

There were significant governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government, by continuing to deny registration to some religious groups and by deregistering some religious organizations, deprived them of their legal right to worship. The Government restricted many religious practices and activities, punishing some citizens because they engaged in religious practices in violation of the registration laws, and generally providing ethnic Russians, Jews, and foreigners greater religious freedom than Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks. The Government tolerates Christian churches, for the most part, as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks. Ethnic Uzbek Christians are often secretive about their faith and sometimes do not attempt to register their organizations out of fear of restrictive reprisals, such as observing to see if they are meeting without benefit of registration, which would lead to arrest under criminal charges. Christian congregations of mixed ethnic background often face difficulties including rejection of registration or delays in response, or are reluctant to list their ethnic Uzbek members on registration lists for fear of incurring harassment by local officials.

The Government, citing national security concerns, has conducted a repressive campaign against persons perceived as Islamic extremists. Government employees generally feel less free to perform their religious responsibilities than do citizens in the private sector, as the state maintains a policy of secularism, and government employees are under greater scrutiny than others to maintain the separation between religion and state structures.

While somewhat supportive of moderate Muslims, the Government is intolerant of Islamic groups that it perceives to be extremist. A small but growing number of unofficial, independent mosques are allowed to operate quietly under the watch of official imams. Some sources have claimed that imams of registered mosques are required to submit lists of individuals in their congregations who may have extremist tendencies. Unlike the past reporting period, there were no new reports that the Government pressured some mahalla (neighborhood) committees and imams to report on those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion. The Government controls the content of imams' sermons and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials.

The Government's harsh treatment of suspected religious extremists has generally suppressed outward expressions of religious piety. Following the May 2005 violence in Andijon, authorities arrested some journalists and human rights activists on charges of religious extremism. There were also credible reports of mahalla committee chairmen delivering special lectures to community gatherings in which they actively discouraged worshipping in mosques. Many sources report that the atmosphere among the Muslim community has improved, with many mosques overflowing into the streets for lack of space during Friday prayer. The Government, while controlling the imams' message and monitoring mosque activities closely, has loosened its grip on those whose appearance or behavior suggests they are observant Muslims, allowing individuals to practice their faith within the confines of a controlled environment. Nevertheless, there is an apparent reluctance to appear overly observant, as hardly any young men attending Friday prayers are bearded.

Unlike during the weeks immediately following the July 2004 terrorist attacks, when Muslim women reported feeling unease about wearing the hijab and several female students were reportedly suspended from Tashkent's Pedagogical University for wearing it, there were no reports of women feeling uncomfortable about doing so during the reporting period. Nevertheless, there were credible reports that some students were prohibited from wearing headscarves at schools.

The Government states that it does not consider repression of persons suspected of extremism to be a matter of religious freedom, but of preventing armed resistance to the Government. Contrary to the previous reporting period, however, there were few reports that authorities were highly suspicious of those with more religiously observant behavior than average, such as frequent mosque attendance, bearded men, and veiled women. Nevertheless, reports suggest that law enforcement and national security officers actively monitored and reported on mosque activities and those of worshippers.

Some mosques continued to have difficulty registering. The Panjera mosque in Navoi, where approximately 500 persons meet for prayer on feast days, has been trying unsuccessfully for 7 years to register, as have several mosques in the southern and eastern Ferghana Valley, despite having the required number of congregants to register. Worshipers of the locally funded Tuman mosque in Akhunbabayev District of Ferghana continued to function after court-enforced registration in early 2004.

In Margilan, Ferghana Province, local government authorities appropriated and converted a madrassah built through private community contributions into a medical training facility, preventing its scheduled fall 2005 opening. Thus, the Government has prevented Ferghana Province, one of Uzbekistan's most populous and observantly Muslim areas, from having a madrassah to train imams. Similarly, the Government appropriated and converted a madrassah in Andijon into a hospital, despite petitions in 2004 by community members to have it reopened.

On October 20, 2005, authorities denied the pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district of Tashkent an additional appeal to keep his church open. This decision prolongs the local pastor's five-year quest to register the church.

On September 8, 2005, the economic court of Karakalpakstan rejected an appeal by the Emmanuel Church of Nukus to overturn the May 2005 MOJ decision to close the church, citing among other reasons, a charge that church members promoted Christianity to children without their parents' permission. Out of approximately twenty Protestant churches that had operated in the region, this was the last to close. Local authorities continued to pressure Baptist churches associated with the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, a denomination that rejects registration on principle, with demands to register their congregations. Forum 18 reported that on April 12, 2006, police and National Security Service (NSS) officials raided a service of Council Baptists at a member's home in the town of Kuvasai in Ferghana Province. Police reportedly interrogated three congregants, and on May 5, 2006, an Administrative Commission fined one congregant \$8 (9,400 soum) for hosting the service in her home. On May 7, 2006, police and NSS officers reportedly returned to raid the church's Sunday service, recorded the names of those present, and threatened members with legal consequences if they did not register.

The International Church of Tashkent, a Protestant nondenominational church that ministers exclusively to Tashkent's international community, has tried unsuccessfully to obtain registration, but now holds services in an officially registered Baptist church. The MOJ and the

CRA have signaled a willingness to assist the International Church, but note that the law requires at least 100 congregants be citizens of Uzbekistan. The International Church meets regularly, without obstruction. However, the Government subjects many of its members to visa and accreditation delays.

Local authorities have continued to block the registration of evangelical Christian congregations, particularly those that attempt to minister to ethnic Uzbeks. In January 2005, congregants of the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik reported that the Department of Justice in Tashkent Region denied their church's registration application because of "grammatical errors in the Uzbek text of their charter." Authorities revoked without explanation the registration of a Baptist congregation in 2003; the last successful Baptist registration occurred in 1999. Despite a number of international appeals and formal legal appeals, the Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, the Hushkhabar Church in Guliston, the Pentecostal Church in Andijon, and the Baptist Church in Gazalkent remained unregistered, apparently because they have ethnic Uzbek members. Church leaders reported that officials cite a multitude of reasons for refusing to register them, ranging from claims of falsified congregation lists to problems certifying addresses, "technicalities," and improper certification by fire inspectors, sanitation workers, and epidemiologists.

The Jehovah's Witnesses continued to try to register in Tashkent where city authorities have refused to approve the address of the congregation's place of worship. Out of the eleven Jehovah's Witnesses churches in the country, those in Chirchik and Ferghana remained the only registered congregations. In Ferghana, they continued to pursue a new legal address with a larger space because they continued to have difficulties renting space for larger meetings. In November 2005, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the Tashkent district office revoked its previous approval, which had allowed a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses to apply for registration after the local mahalla had blocked registration by refusing to approve the group's application. Many in the Government express suspicion of the Jehovah's Witnesses, viewing it as an extremist group.

Internal police training documents have listed the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and HT, as security threats. Local officials and representatives of the religious establishment continued to express apprehension about the group's missionary activities. According to a Forum 18 report, CRA chairman Shoazim Minovarov specifically cited the Jehovah's Witnesses in a statement saying that the Government needed to take measures against proselytism.

There were reports that the MOJ, which administers accreditation for employees of NGOs, refused to accredit the administrative director of the Tashkent Institute of Asian Culture and Development and one of his staff members due to accusations of missionary activities. Proper accreditation, a necessity for anyone attempting to work in Uzbekistan, is controlled by the MOJ, which has the ability to force out, without bringing formal charges, those it believes are proselytizing.

In April 2006, after the Government levied administrative fines for improper registration of the Samarkand branch of an American-based education NGO, the organization and its U.S.-citizen volunteers closed and withdrew its staff. Members of the National Security Service and the local police had raided the volunteers' homes and confiscated personal literature and videos. Although the MOJ never charged the organization with proselytizing to local youths in English language clubs, the MOJ had announced it would conduct a detailed monitoring of them.

There were unconfirmed reports that the Government continues to monitor a Presbyterian church in Tashkent Oblast, visiting approximately every three months to discuss church activities, reiterating that proselytizing is illegal, and scrutinizing the pictures and names of new church members. The Government requires the church to file monthly reports on its activities.

In January 2005, authorities denied Russian Orthodox Church officials permission to bring relics of two Orthodox saints into the country. There were no similar reports during the period covered by this report.

Unlike previous years, there were no credible reports of heads of mahalla committees threatening converts that they would not be given a cemetery burial if they did not stop attending church.

For historical and cultural reasons, evangelical pastors generally preach in Russian while offering limited services in the Uzbek language--the official national language and the one linked most closely to the majority Muslim population. Presumably because Christian materials, such as the New Testament and selected scripture readings, in the Uzbek language would make the faith more accessible to the ethnic Uzbek population, the CRA tries to restrict the publication and distribution of such materials, allowing some limited concessions and materials such as some Uzbek-language coloring books with Bible themes. The Government requires the Bible Society to file regular reports on its printing, importing, and translating activities. The CRA apparently informally restricts the quantity of Uzbek-language materials that groups may import.

Although the Government requires that the CRA approve all religious literature, in practice a number of other government entities, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), NSS, Customs Service, and police may suppress or confiscate religious literature of which they do not approve. The CRA, in accordance with the law, has given the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious organizations of which seven now exist: a nondenominational Bible society; the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan; two Islamic centers; and Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic offices. However, the Government uses bureaucratic obstacles, such as preventing registration of churches with Uzbek names on their membership rosters, and occasionally has blocked registered central religious organizations from producing or importing Christian literature in the Uzbek language, even though Bibles in many other languages are available in Tashkent bookstores.

The Government may confiscate and destroy illegally imported religious literature. Examples of this, reported by Forum 18, include: the seizure, reported in April 2006, of 126 religious videos from a member of the Pentecostal church traveling to Nukus; the confiscation of religious materials from a member of Jehovah's Witnesses during a raid of his apartment in Tashkent in August 2005; the seizure of fifteen Bibles from a Protestant pastor in Gulistan on June 17, 2005; and the confiscation of ninety Hare Krishna books from a devotee in a small

town outside of Nukus in the same month. Although the CRA denies it, authorities often incinerate confiscated literature. On August 12, 2005, a Tashkent regional judge ordered the destruction of 33 Bibles, 160 copies of the Gospel of Mark, and approximately 600 Christian leaflets for children, all of which were printed in the Uzbek language. Authorities had seized the literature outside of Tashkent on July 20, 2005, from a group of four Baptists whom authorities subsequently detained and interrogated for eight hours.

The Uzbekistan International Post Office in Tashkent scrutinizes all incoming packages and sends examples of any religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. In the event that the CRA bans the materials, it mails a letter to the intended recipient and the sender explaining the rejection by the committee. The CRA has denied entrance into Uzbekistan of both Christian and Muslim titles.

Access to Muslim publications is also tightly controlled by the State, which requires a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, CDs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Many books are published with the phrase "permission for this book was granted by the CRA," or "this book is recommended by the CRA," thus indicating official sanction. Generally, only books published under the Muslim Board's imprint, "Movarounnahr," contain these phrases. Other works published under the imprint of the state-owned Sharq or Adolat Publishing Houses do not appear to require CRA approval, even when they deal with Islamic law. A very small number of works in Arabic, imported from abroad, is sometimes available from book dealers. More controversial literature, if being offered, is not displayed, but only available upon request. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists may lead to arrest and prosecution. The Government categorically prohibits HT leaflets.

Previously, in March 2005, members of a Tashkent-based Baptist church reported that police confiscated over 1,000 CRA-approved religious booklets and detained seven church members for questioning. In August 2004, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that authorities detained a member and confiscated religious literature. In February 2004, according to press reports, police in Karakalpakstan confiscated religious literature from a Jehovah's Witness in Nukus. In January 2004, police searched the home of a Jehovah's Witnesses member in Jizzakh and confiscated religious literature.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to commit serious abuses of religious freedom. The Government's campaign against extremist Muslim groups resulted in numerous serious human rights abuses during the period covered by this report. The campaign was directed at three types of Muslims: alleged Wahhabists, in particular those educated at madrassahs abroad or those followers of either Imam Abduvali Mirzaev of Andijon, who disappeared in 1995, or Imam Abidkhan Nazarov of Tashkent, who fled to Kazakhstan in 1998 to avoid arrest and was granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on March 15, 2006; those suspected of being involved in the 1999 Tashkent bombings or of being involved with the IMU, a Namangan-rooted group on the U.S. list of international terrorist organizations; and suspected members of the extremist Islamic political party HT. This ongoing campaign has resulted in the arrest of many observant, non-extremist Muslims, as well as allegations, dozens of them confirmed, that law enforcement has physically mistreated or tortured hundreds, perhaps thousands over the years. Persons accused of involvement with HT, which often involved nothing more than having attended one of its meetings or passing along banned HT leaflets, continued to be subject to prison sentences of up to fifteen, sometimes twenty years.

Authorities appeared to suspect individuals belonging to Islamic organizations and Muslims who meet privately to pray or study Islam of extremism. People accused of "Wahhabism" faced abuse ranging from job loss to physical abuse and long imprisonment.

The Government branded the Islamic missionary group Tabligh Jamaat ("Outreach Society") as extremist. The group's worship, dress, and grooming practices are in accordance with their interpretation of Islamic practice during the Prophet Muhammad's time. Various religious experts assert that there is no indication that Tabligh Jamaat seeks to overthrow the regime; members claim to be exclusively religious and apolitical. There were several reports that regional leaders have appeared on local television channels stating that schoolchildren may not attend mosques, and in Bukhara, there was a report that police have not allowed schoolchildren into the mosque.

In March 2005 Radio Liberty reported a trial of six Tabligh Jamaat members; four were amnestied and two were fined. In January 2005 a Tashkent court took the unusual action of granting amnesty to seven of eight Tabligh Jamaat members on trial for extremism. This immediately followed a number of cases between July and December 2004 in the Ferghana Valley: the November 2004 sentencing of two followers to six-month terms, four of which were credited as time served, and the October 2004 sentencing of eleven members to five-year prison terms in Andijon.

The Government continued to prosecute persons suspected of involvement in the Islamic group Akromiya. According to religious experts, Akromiya is a religious movement that promotes business, not extremism. On July 25, 2005, the Tashkent criminal court convicted three alleged Akromiya members Akhad Ziyodkhozayev, Bokhodir Karimov, and Abdubosid Zakirov of participation in a religious extremist group, conspiracy to overthrow the constitutional order, establishing a criminal group, and disseminating materials constituting a threat to public order. The three received sentences of 15.5 to 16 years imprisonment. Trial observers noted that the convictions were based almost entirely on defendants' confessions and witness testimony, and that evidence presented in court did not suggest that the defendants were involved in criminal activity. In March 2005 a Syrdarya court sentenced seven food vendors from the town of Bakht to prison sentences of eight to nine years based on their alleged membership in Akromiya, though their families claimed their convictions were based on coerced testimony.

In May 2005 peaceful demonstrations in support of twenty-three alleged Akromiya members led to civil unrest in Andijon. On the evening of May 12, 2005, an unknown number of individuals, possibly supporters of the men facing trial, attacked a police garrison, seized weapons, and broke into a nearby prison and released several hundred inmates. On the evening of May 13, according to several witnesses, military vehicles drove into Bobur Square, where several thousand civilians had gathered, and fired indiscriminately into the crowd multiple times and without warning. The total number of dead as a result was estimated from 170 to more than 700. In subsequent public statements, the Government referred to all on trial, in prison, and those killed on May 13 as religious extremists. By the end of the reporting period, approximately 257 individuals had been convicted of various charges, including Islamic extremism, murder, terrorism, and anti-constitutional

activity in connection with the Andijon events.

Following the terrorist attacks of March, April and July 2004, the Government detained at least 500 persons, the overwhelming majority of whom were accused of membership in HT or Wahhabi groups. The Government also detained relatives of persons already in jail on charges of extremism. The Government released the majority of those taken into custody after questioning; some detainees made credible allegations of torture. The court convicted all eighty-five of those charged in connection with the terrorist acts, sentencing them to prison terms ranging from three to eighteen years.

Authorities often severely mistreat persons arrested on suspicion of extremism, using torture, beatings, and particularly harsh prison conditions, typically sentencing these individuals to between seven and twelve-year terms, though some defendants, particularly those also accused of involvement with HT or terrorist activity, received sentences of up to twenty years. Prison authorities reportedly do not allow many prisoners suspected of Islamic extremism to practice their religion freely and, in some circumstances, do not allow them to own a Qur'an. Prison authorities often do not permit inmates to pray five times a day or to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. Last year, authorities reportedly punished inmates who attempted to fulfill their religious obligations against prison rules or who protested the rules, with solitary confinement and beatings. This year, as authorities did not allow visits by independent outside monitors to places of detention, there was no reliable way of verifying whether such punishments took place.

During the period of this report, there were two allegations of deaths in detention. According to human rights activists, on May 1, 2006, thirty-four-year-old Kakhramon Teshaboyev died in a Tashkent prison medical facility, four years after he was convicted and sentenced to eighteen years in prison on charges of anti-constitutional activity and membership in a criminal organization. Authorities reportedly delivered Teshaboyev's body to his family and pressured them to bury it as soon as possible. A local imam died within three days of his September 14, 2005, sentencing after allegedly receiving injections of an unknown substance while in prison. His family requested an investigation into the imam's death, but no such investigation had taken place by the end of the reporting period. In March 2004 Abdurrahman Narzullayev, a convicted religious extremist serving a sixteen-year sentence in Karshi prison, died of a pulmonary infection after prison authorities allegedly attempted to break his hunger strike by force-feeding him. Although specific information is difficult to obtain, human rights and other observers maintain that prisoners frequently die of diseases directly related to the conditions of their confinement.

On September 24, 2004, the Supreme Court issued a decree definitively banning the use of evidence obtained by torture or other illegal means. The Government has since taken limited administrative steps to eliminate torture in detention, but there were numerous reports that such treatment remains routine and systematic.

There were no new developments in the following cases: the February 2005 case in which two followers of Sufi Islam were given six-year sentences while claiming that authorities planted HT leaflets on them during their arrest and tortured them; the internationally monitored October 2004 convictions of twenty-three alleged extremists in which witnesses and defendants stated that police extracted their testimonies through torture; or the October 2004 conviction on criminal charges of the imam of a Navoi mosque and sixteen members, in which the defendants admitted only to being adherents of Islam.

In May 2004 members of the security services allegedly abducted Husnuddin Nazarov while on his way to evening prayer services; according to Nazarov's family, authorities are holding him in detention at an undisclosed location. Husnuddin Nazarov is the eldest son of Imam Abidkhan Nazarov, an influential religious figure in Tashkent who was dismissed from his position at the Tokhtabay mosque in 1995, fled to Kazakhstan, and was resettled as a refugee by the UNHCR in March 2006. Imam Nazarov's followers were principal targets of the Government's effort to end extremism. Several of the Imam's followers were deported from Kazakhstan in late November 2005. Most were tried, convicted, and sentenced to an average of six-years imprisonment on charges of Islamic extremism, while one defendant, Rukhitdin Fakhrutdinov, was awaiting trial at the end of the reporting period.

Authorities often harass or arrest family members of persons wanted in connection with Islamic political activities or already jailed in connection with those activities. Though there are exceptions, in many cases the relative's only crime is association.

Authorities continued to detain women for participating in or organizing demonstrations demanding the release of male relatives jailed on suspicion of Islamic extremism. On April 20, 2006, authorities arrested and charged six women with possession and dissemination of HT materials, according to Andijon television reports. Authorities claimed that 300 leaflets, 100 books, 100 magazines, and other media were confiscated from the homes of the women, who lived in different towns in Andijon Province.

Authorities usually hold most detained women for a short period of time, releasing them with an administrative fine after a short period of time, and driving them home. There were reports that police insulted or forced some women to remove their head coverings. Although the police generally did not arrest women simply for taking part in demonstrations, many Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) offices maintained a list of women who participated in protests and detained many for questioning in the aftermath of the March, April, and July 2004 bombings. According to the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Activists of Uzbekistan, in December 2004, authorities amnestied four women who had been charged with anti-constitutional activity, possession of banned religious materials, and religious extremism.

On April 19, 2006, the Tashkent Province Criminal Court convicted eight men from the town of Yangiyul on charges of membership in an unregistered religious organization and sentenced seven of them to three years of compulsory labor in addition to paying 20 percent of their earnings to the state during that time. The court sentenced the eighth man to two years in prison. Prosecutors initially charged the men with membership in a banned extremist organization, which would have carried a maximum penalty of fifteen-years imprisonment; however, for unspecified reasons, prosecutors reduced the charges while the trial was in progress. Observers reported that prosecutors may have reduced the charges in part because the evidence rested entirely upon testimony by a convicted thief, and that other court testimony did not indicate that the defendants were involved in any illegal activity. The defendants testified that investigators had beaten them and subjected them to other forms of physical mistreatment and threats of violence in detention. The judge disregarded the testimony regarding torture, saying that the men had made the allegations to avoid responsibility for their crimes. Family members of defendants reported that law

enforcement officers threatened them with violence and harassed them during the investigation and trial.

There were continued reports from human rights activists that prison officials beat and isolated prisoners convicted of extremism who refused to sign letters renouncing what the authorities deemed religious extremism, or who refused to accept visiting imams' moderate interpretations of Islam. In April 2005, courts sentenced nine persons convicted of religious extremism to prison terms ranging from six to thirteen years, amid allegations that law-enforcement officials tortured them to provoke confessions. On January 20, 2005, in Tashkent City Court, authorities accused eight Muslims of using and distributing banned Islamic audio recordings.

As in previous years, there were reports that police planted narcotics, ammunition, and religious leaflets on citizens to justify their arrests. According to human rights activists, the police arrested many of those with outward signs of religious observance, such as traditional clothing or beards. There were also reports that authorities tortured, and beat evangelical Christians or failed to punish community members who did so. In June 2005 police arrested a Pentecostal Christian in Tashkent and reportedly tortured him in an attempt to force him to abandon Christianity. In April 2005 Forum 18 reported that authorities failed to respond to Christian convert Khaldibek Primbetov's complaint that his neighbors in Karakalpakstan had beaten him and told him to "return to Islam" or leave the village. In June 2004 Forum 18 reported that an NSS officer in Khorezm questioned two members of an unregistered Baptist church and beat one of the men. Local authorities denied the allegations.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. Police occasionally broke up meetings of unregistered evangelical congregations and detained their members. With a few exceptions, authorities often charged those detained with administrative fines which were reportedly increased from five to ten times the minimum wage to fifty to one-hundred times the minimum wage.

During the reporting year, the Government also harassed Christians in the Andijon area. Forum 18 reported on June 20, 2006, that a Protestant pastor from Andijon, Dmitry Shestakov, leader of a registered Full Gospel Pentecostal congregation, went into hiding for fear of arrest. He faces between ten and twenty years in prison if found guilty of treason charges.

As in previous years, there were several allegations that Christian evangelicals were detained. Even if they are not taken into custody, pastors who conduct unauthorized religious services still run the risk of arrest, which can have an effect on their activities. There was a report that on February 7, 2006, authorities fined five members of the "Gen-Khyan" Presbyterian Church, including the church's pastor, for congregating without proper registration of their religious organization. Local officials continued to harass Bakhtiyor Tuychiyev, the ethnic Uzbek pastor of a Full Gospel Pentecostal church in Andijon. He has tried unsuccessfully to register his church since 2002. In November 2005 there were reports that the local authorities interrogated the pastor, and on December 23, 2005, that unidentified assailants attacked him, reviling him as a "traitor to the faith."

On August 10, 2005, a criminal court in Navoi convicted a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, Azim Klichev, of teaching religion without government authorization and fined him approximately \$70 (78,350 soum), ten times the minimum monthly wage. A local appeals court later upheld the decision. On August 30 a criminal court in Karshi convicted members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Bakhrom Pulatov and Feruza Mamatova, of conducting illegal religious meetings and proselytizing. Authorities fined Pulatov approximately \$640 (705,150 soum), or 90 times the minimum monthly wage, and Mamatova approximately \$500 (548,450 soum), seventy times the minimum monthly wage. The fines, although within the amount the law prescribed, were far beyond that normally imposed for religious crimes. A local appeals court upheld the decisions.

In May 2005 authorities detained and questioned 20 of the 125 members of an unregistered Baptist church in the Surkhandarya Region. Also in 2005 authorities detained and administratively punished six parishioners of Bethany Baptist congregation in Tashkent for unregistered activity. In June 2005 police reportedly arrested two Baptist pastors and four church members after raiding their Tashkent church. In 2005 courts sentenced Baptist Farkhod Khamedov to ten days of administrative punishment, but authorities disciplined law enforcement officers in connection with his treatment. In October 2004 a district court in Tashkent fined a Baptist pastor \$65 (65,000 soum) for unregistered religious activity. In 2003 authorities imprisoned and fined Baptists in Khalkabad for worshiping privately, and fined a Baptist pastor in Urgench for allegedly conducting religious work among children without their parents' permission.

Authorities continued to raid other Christian denominations as well. On September 23, 2005, according to Forum 18 reports, authorities arrested sixteen Baptists from the Council of Churches who were conducting an evangelistic meeting in Kagan outside of Bukhara, and detained them for a day. Authorities also confiscated the Baptists' Christian literature, including Gospels in the Uzbek language. On April 21, 2006, in the Shaikhantahur District of Tashkent, Government authorities arrested three members of the Jesus Christ Charismatic Church who were engaged in humanitarian activities at a children's hospital. Although the authorities later released them, the prosecutor is carrying out a criminal investigation on one member for teaching religion.

During the period of this report, the Government particularly targeted Full Gospel churches. Forum 18 reported an incident involving a member of the Full Gospel Church in Syrdarya in which authorities summoned Andrei Li to court on April 7, 2006. The court completed the proceedings without his knowledge and convicted him and fined him approximately \$42 (50,400 soum) for illegal religious activity. Authorities fined the Fores Full Gospel pastor from Tashkent approximately \$4 (4800 soum) after Government authorities raided his home while fifteen members of his church arrived to celebrate the holidays on January 11, 2006. On November 14, 2005, authorities arrested the pastor of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Jizzak, who faced charges of "participation in the activity of an illegal religious organization" and possible imprisonment of up to three years, after raiding his home in October 2005, when other members of his congregation had met for dinner.

Additionally, in June 2005, authorities took into custody approximately twenty Full Gospel Pentecostal Church members in Tashkent; several credible media outlets reported that authorities verbally and physically abused, and threatened to rape, the members during several days of interrogations. Under the guise of the murder investigation of an American citizen who belonged to the church, Government authorities harassed church members for allowing ethnic Uzbeks into their congregation. Internet websites reported that on April 30, 2006, 160 congregants from the formerly sanctioned Emmanuel Full Gospel Church in Nukus were celebrating Easter in a local hotel when

approximately 50 policemen stormed the premises, arresting at least 8 individuals, including the pastor. During the raid, Government officers threatened many of the children into signing statements renouncing their faith while parents faced similar pressure to discourage their family's involvement with the church. After hours of questioning, the eight church members were released without charges or fines. In a related incident, also on April 30, 2006, local police officers attacked the caretaker of the land owned by the church, beating him and breaking his arm, in an attempt to intimidate leaders of the Full Gospel church to relinquish the property to the Government.

On April 24, 2006, numerous press reports indicated that Urgench City criminal investigators raided the home of the pastor of the Union of Independent Churches as twelve of his congregants met for lunch. Investigators seized the pastor's computer and Christian literature, along with another member's digital camera and laptop. The pastor and one church member faced administrative charges for allegations of proselytizing. The Government deported three Turkmen citizens present during the police raid, and reportedly prohibited them from returning by placing black stamps in their passports. On April 11, 2006, Government authorities raided a local Protestant's apartment while she was meeting with two other church members. Authorities took all three members along with one small child to Tashkent's Yunusobod District police headquarters, where officers attempted to force them to sign confessions of illegal religious activity. They refused and, after several hours, were eventually released.

In October 2004 police disrupted services of an unregistered Christian denomination in Tashkent and questioned several dozen members. In September 2004 authorities disrupted a prayer meeting of the Greater Grace Church in Samarkand, confiscated literature, and forced members to sign confessions. When the pastor traveled abroad, the Government warned him not to return and threatened him and his family. In March 2004 a criminal court fined six members of a Protestant church in Tashkent for holding unauthorized meetings in a private home. In August 2003 Nukus police raided the Peace Protestant Church and fined two church leaders for holding illegal religious services. According to Forum 18, in September 2003, police in Chirchik disrupted Sunday services of the unregistered Friendship Protestant Church.

In October 2004 a Surkhandarya court fined Pentecostal Pastor Bakhrom Nazarov \$312 (326,500 soum) for proselytizing; police had earlier raided the homes of Nazarov's relatives, without identifying themselves, and confiscated Christian literature. In July 2004 a Termez court sentenced Nazarov to ten days in prison and fined ten members of his church \$5 to \$31 (5,440 to 32,680 soum).

Although the authorities tolerate the existence of many Christian evangelical groups, they enforce the law's ban on proselytizing. The Government often monitors and harasses those who openly try to convert Muslims to Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses have come under particular scrutiny. On December 12, 2005, two Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to several days' imprisonment and nine others were fined \$11 (13,200 soum) for unauthorized religious activity. Also during the period covered by this report, a Member of Jehovah's Witnesses faced prosecution for proselytizing in the western city of Navoi. The church member was charged with attempting to convert a believer from one religious group to another. He was convicted on October 6, 2005, and fined approximately \$77 (92,400 soum). On August 31, 2005, two Jehovah's Witnesses were fined a total of more than \$1,300 (1,320,000 soum) for illegal religious activity. This was the largest fine levied on Christians by the Government in recent history. On August 10, 2005, courts convicted a member of Jehovah's Witnesses from Prigovor (near Navoi) of providing unauthorized religion instruction and fined him \$44 (52,800 soum), as Forum 18 reported. In September 2004, courts charged Jehovah's Witnesses member Dilshod Akhmedov with proselytizing, but authorities later dropped the charges. In July 2004 one member was detained for distributing religious literature, but the court in Takhiatash quickly closed the case. In December 2003, two members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi were arrested while preaching door-to-door.

On May 29, 2006, authorities deported a member of Jehovah's Witnesses to Kazakhstan. On April 27, 2006, authorities arrested and sentenced a member of Jehovah's Witnesses to 10 days in prison for illegal religious activity. On April 12, 2006, authorities coordinated country-wide raids of homes of Jehovah's Witnesses during their annual holy day, which commemorates the death of Jesus, and detained more than 500 people. Reports claimed that authorities beat some members and threatened women with rape or other humiliating acts unless they signed confession statements. Most of those arrested were released within a day, several with administrative fines. Following these prosecutions, on April 26, a Russian citizen traveled to the country to represent Jehovah's Witnesses facing trial. Authorities detained him at Tashkent airport, then denied him entry and deported him. The Witnesses then sent an Uzbek citizen attorney to Karshi to defend members on trial. On May 22, while in court working, authorities sent him to a cell and detained him for more than twenty-four hours.

In June 2005 the Karshi city prosecutor filed criminal charges against three Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi for proselytizing, meeting as an unregistered group, and distributing banned religious materials. In March 2005, on the same liturgical occasion as the April 2006 raids, authorities carried out a similar coordinated raid against Jehovah's Witnesses meetings in Tashkent and eight other cities, arresting approximately 200 church members and releasing most soon afterwards, but subjecting some to longer detention, police beatings, and small fines. In January 2005, authorities raided an unauthorized Jehovah's Witnesses religious meeting in Karshi and questioned forty-two members. Courts sentenced two members to ten days in prison and fined seven more.

In 2004 police fined two Jehovah's Witnesses in Kogon \$10 (10,900 soum) and \$13 (14,170 soum) respectively for allegedly conducting illegal religious teaching. Also in 2004, authorities sentenced Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Kushchevoy of Samarkand to three years of corrective labor, later reduced to one-year probation, for providing unauthorized religious instruction, and in June 2004, in Uchkuduk, detained Jehovah's Witnesses member Tolkin Hankildiev and fined him \$26 (27,200 soum).

Credible reports alleged that authorities arrested two Baptist pastors and four church members in June 2005, after plainclothes police officers raided their church in Tashkent. In May 2005 authorities detained and questioned 20 of the 125 members of the unregistered Baptist church in Surkhandarya Province. In March 2005 police raided an unauthorized Protestant meeting involving citizens and South Korean missionaries outside Tashkent; the citizens were fined.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Since 2003 the Government has allowed former Mufti Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf to publish widely on a variety of religious topics in both print and electronic formats. His popular Islamic website remains unblocked by the Government and he continues to host a popular radio program on Islam and to teach at the Islamic University.

Authorities have allowed a small but growing number of unregistered mosques to reopen, both in cities and in the countryside. In addition, non-state sanctioned imams continued to work, particularly in rural areas, under the close watch of religious officials. Reports note that the atmosphere in the Muslim community has improved somewhat, as observant Muslims are being allowed to practice their faith within these controlled environments.

During the year covered in this report, the number of Hajj pilgrims increased from 4,200 to 5,000.

The Government continued to respect the military pacifism of Jehovah's Witnesses. The draft board routinely gave exemptions.

On April 30, 2005, an official at the MVD confirmed reports that authorities disciplined a Chilonzor District inspector in connection with a case involving actions taken against Baptist members Flyura Valitova and Farkhod Khamedov (see above).

In March 2006, the Government completed the annual year-end amnesty of an indeterminate number of prisoners of conscience from the 2005-2006 amnesty, the vast majority of whom had been convicted of Islamic extremism. This followed an amnesty in 2004-2005 of 361, as well as the 2003-2004 amnesty of 704 such prisoners. Imams met with amnestied prisoners convicted of extremism upon their return to their communities.

During the period covered by this report, there continued to be increased tolerance in general for the use of head coverings by Muslim women. The hijab was seen more frequently in Tashkent, the more religiously conservative parts of the Ferghana Valley, and the southern provinces of Kashkadarya and Surkhondarya. The CRA has taken the position that women should not be barred from educational institutions on the basis of their religious dress and has actively assisted women who have been previously expelled to gain readmission to their universities. The CRA's support of the readmission of these women may be attributed to the January 2005 UN Human Rights Committee decision in favor of an Uzbek woman whom the Tashkent State Institute for Eastern Languages had expelled in 1999 in connection with her wearing of the hijab. In response to the woman's petition, the committee found that the Government had violated her rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. During the period covered by this report, it was more common to see women on the street wearing the hijab and, less frequently, the veil.

Authorities gave Greater Grace Church in Samarkand a permit to meet once a week as a congregation in a Korean Church, as well as in people's homes. At Christmas, authorities permitted the youth choral group to present a concert for the public Children's home.

There have been reports of some recent cases where authorities have dismissed charges against Protestants after their lawyer protested procedural matters or evidence. For example, the Urtachirchik district court in Tashkent Province tried to bring charges against two members of the Pentecostal church for teaching religion. On May 15, 2006, the court dropped the case. Likewise, on May 5, 2006, the Gulistan district court dropped the administrative case of a member of the Evangelical Charismatic Church, releasing her from punishment.

On January 21, 2006, the court also intervened on behalf of four ethnic-Uzbek students whom the Nukus Pediatric Medical Institute expelled from student housing for "promoting Christianity among fellow students." Reports indicate that all students are back in the institute's housing.

On January 7, 2006, the civil court of Tashkent city in the Mirabad district dismissed the case against a volunteer of the Uzbekistan Bible Society. On January 6, 2006, in Termez city, the court ruled illegal the January 1, 2006 detention of the pastor of an unregistered Pentecostal church and confiscation of his car, releasing him and the car.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

There was no pattern of discrimination against Jewish persons. Synagogues, Hebrew education, Jewish cultural events, and the publication of a community newspaper take place openly and undisturbed. Many Jews have emigrated to the United States and Israel, most likely because of bleak economic prospects and connections to families abroad, rather than anti-Jewish sentiment. The diminished numbers make it impossible to attain the provisions of the 1998 revised religion laws, which require registration of eight synagogues in eight different cities in order to establish a rabbinate. The chief rabbi continues to press the Government unsuccessfully to allow for an exception. There are Jewish kindergartens in Tashkent and Samarkand officially teaching Jewish "culture." In the past, HT members have distributed anti-Semitic fliers with text generally originating abroad and not representative of feelings of the vast majority of the population; there were no reports of such fliers being distributed in the current reporting period. Although the religious press carried initial stories speculating on anti-Semitic motives for the February 25, 2006 death from head injuries of a Tashkent Jewish community leader, Avraam Yagudayev; as well as the June 8, 2006 murders of a twenty-year-old secretary to prominent Tashkent-based Rabbi David Gurevich, Karina Loifer and her mother, preliminary investigation did not indicate that anti-Semitism motivated these deaths. The investigations were ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

Society generally tolerated Christians, provided they did not actively proselytize and were not converted ethnic Uzbeks, who suffer discrimination. Evangelical Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts encounter difficulties stemming from discrimination.

On December 5, 2005, an article entitled "Our Faith is Not for Sale" appeared in a weekly newspaper. Its author passionately denounced missionary activities, characterizing missionaries as dangerous and subversive. Implicit was the notion that missionaries are working on behalf of foreign governments hostile to Central Asia Muslims. At least one Tashkent-based imam applauded the sentiments voiced in the article and urged his congregation to read it.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy actively engages in monitoring religious freedom issues and maintains contact with numerous sectors of society including government and religious leaders, academicians, think-tank experts, and human rights advocates. High-level executive branch officials met with Uzbek officials abroad and in the country during the period covered by this report, and expressed strong concerns regarding human rights, including the U.S. stance on freedom of religious expression.

The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officials met with local religious leaders, human rights activists, and country officials to discuss specific issues of human rights and religious freedom. Officials in Washington met on several occasions with embassy officials of the country to convey U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom. U.S. officials traveled around the country meeting with religious leaders and groups as well as with government officials. Embassy officials maintain contact with the CRA, as well as with religious leaders and human rights activists. When the embassy learned of difficulties faced by religious groups, it intervened on their behalf when possible as in the past, taking such actions as attempting to contact Government officials and attending trials. These actions were for observant Muslims and Christians, and faith-based foreign aid organizations. All but two of the approximately fifty Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Tashkent's Chilonzor District on March 24, 2005 were released within hours, a fact they credited to the embassy's presence. The embassy continues to raise concerns, despite a downturn in our bilateral relationship with Uzbekistan.

The ambassador and other embassy officials met with numerous Muslim clergymen and other religious figures. Members of the religious community, as well as other Uzbek opinion leaders, routinely receive information from the embassy's Information Resource Center. Outreach events included visits by the ambassador and embassy officials to mosques and madrassahs. Embassy officials urged the Government to allow more freedom of religious expression and more mosque registrations. U.S. officials, both in Washington, D.C. and in Tashkent, have encouraged the Government to revise its laws on religion, including revising the 100-member minimum required to form a religious group, repealing the ban on proselytizing, lifting restrictions on the importation and publication of religious literature, and eliminating legal provisions prohibiting the private teaching of religion, which the U.S. government believes is an essential element for preventing further radicalization of young Muslims.

The U.S. sponsors exchange and educational programs that are specifically designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom. Since 2004, the Community Connections and Cultural and Religious Pluralism projects, programs conducted in cooperation with the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), brought eighty local Islamic leaders to the United States. A three-year Comparative Religious Studies Program, funded by the U.S. government and managed by the University of Washington, provides for exchange of experts and professors from five local universities in order to promote religious tolerance.

The U.S. government promotes religious freedom generally as part of its human rights programming, although the Government of Uzbekistan's closure of NGOs during the reporting period seriously hampered these efforts. In 2006, the U.S. government sponsored training in three cities in Uzbekistan for defense advocates and human rights activists on international religious freedom standards, as well as a follow-up roundtable, and a regional conference in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on the role of religion in promoting peace and social partnerships, which included religious leaders from Uzbekistan. In 2005, the U.S. government sponsored the participation of an Uzbek specialist on human rights in the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life in Jerusalem. In 2006, the U.S. government sponsored Uzbeks' participation in the "Law, Religion and Social Change" conference at the National University in Canberra, Australia.

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