

# Uzbekistan

## Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2015, Warsaw

22 September – 3 October 2014

The government of Uzbekistan withholds religious freedom from Jehovah's Witnesses and local authorities frequently harass and mistreat them

- Uzbekistan has repeatedly denied Jehovah's Witnesses the right to register their congregations, and considers any religious activity of the Witnesses outside of their one registered congregation in Chirchiq as illegal.
- As a consequence, authorities arrest Witnesses for attending religious meetings, mistreat them physically, and fine them for possessing religious literature.

2015	
55	Fines for possessing religious literature
> 20	Convictions for religious activity
2014	
81	Police raids on religious meetings and private homes

### Harassment by Police

- (1) **Qarshi.** On 7 March 2015, police stopped six of Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>1</sup> as they returned from a religious meeting held in the town of Chirchiq—the location of the only officially registered congregation in Uzbekistan. Police initiated an unwarranted search of their homes and confiscated Bibles and personal belongings, such as mobile devices and personal notes. The police interrogated all six Witnesses, including an 11-year-old boy, and again the next day for another four hours. On 18 March 2015, police interrogated one of the Witnesses again.
- (2) **Qarshi.** On 19 March 2015, police officers stopped a female Witness as she returned home after a religious meeting in the town of Chirchiq. Police officers confiscated some of her personal notes and a mobile device and interrogated her again the next day. A month later the police interrogated her and threatened to charge her criminally for illegal religious activity.
- (3) **Samarkand.** On 19 June 2015, two female Witnesses, both Uzbek nationals, were arrested on the street and taken to the police department. They were interrogated by the chief of the police department for over seven hours. A police officer gave one of the women an ultimatum—she could choose to spend 15 days in prison or have her hair forcibly cut. With scissors in hand, the officer approached her. When she said that she

<sup>1</sup> Names withheld

would file an application regarding attempted rape, the officer stopped. However, another officer grabbed her by the hair and flung her against the wall.

- (4) **Denov, Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan.** On 4 July 2015, police officers raided and searched the houses of two Witness women. The police interrogated the women, forced them to write an explanatory note stating that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, and seized religious materials.

### Raids on Religious Meetings

Police often raid the meetings and private homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan—in 2014, there were 81 police raids. Listed below are some of the more recent examples.

- (1) **Samarkand.** On 16 April 2015, six of Jehovah's Witnesses and two small children gathered in a home for a religious meeting. During the meeting, the police raided the home and confiscated personal religious literature and personal belongings, such as mobile devices. Police detained the Witnesses for hours at the Samarkand Region Department of Internal Affairs.
- (2) **Samarkand.** On 1 May 2015, police raided a private home where eight of Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting for worship. They were threatened, interrogated, and battered. Officials planted drugs on one of the male Witnesses and severely beat two Witnesses—a man and a woman. Two of the women were sexually harassed, both physically and verbally. Police brought the Witnesses to the Pastdargom District Department of the Samarkand Region at 7:00 pm on 1 May and interrogated them until 8:00 am on 2 May. Major Rustam Rakhmatov, one of the officials who conducted the interrogation, was intoxicated. The police seized the Witnesses' personal religious literature and belongings, such as smartphones and tablets, and never returned them.

On 22 June 2015, the District Pastdargom Court of the Samarkand region found the six of the eight Witnesses guilty of the administrative offense of "illegal possession and storage of religious literature." Fines varied from 202 euros to nearly 440 euros. Authorities also initiated a criminal case against one Witness under the criminal charge of "illegal production, purchase, storage, carriage or traffic in narcotics." Officers told the women they had abused that if they filed any claims of sexual harassment, the police would charge them with giving false evidence.

### Legal Registration Denied Outside of Chirchiq

Only one congregation in the entire country—located in the town of Chirchiq—has registration. Jehovah's Witnesses have not been granted registration in any other region of the country. As a result, all religious literature found outside of Chirchiq is labelled "banned," and religious meetings held outside of Chirchiq are deemed unlawful. Authorities have rejected the Witnesses' repeated efforts to register in Tashkent.

### Criminalization of Religious Activity

In its fourth periodic report on Uzbekistan, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that "the legal provisions prohibiting proselytism and other missionary activities continue to be in force." It also expressed concern about reports of "arrest for 'illegal religious activity', detention, fines and prison sentences for Christians and members of other minority religions conducting peaceful religious activities outside registered structures; [and] censorship of religious materials and restrictions on their use only inside buildings of registered religious groups."

The Committee called on Uzbekistan to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious belief and the right of peaceful assembly. It stated that Uzbekistan should decriminalise “proselytism and other missionary activities, and investigate all acts of interference with the freedom of religion of independent Muslims, Christians and other minority religions practising their religion outside registered structures.”—CCPR/C/UZB/4, adopted 20 July 2015, pars. 22, 24.

### State Censorship of Religious Literature

Following a meeting with the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) on 6 April 2015, authorities indicated that Witnesses could possess some religious literature but solely for their personal use. However, when police raid the homes of Witnesses outside of Chirchiq, they seize any religious literature they find and send it to the CRA, which labels the literature “banned” and fines the individuals possessing the literature.

- (1) **Navoyee.** On 17 January 2015, policemen and a KGB officer raided the private home of a female Witness, confiscating her Bible and a personal computer. On 10 February 2015, authorities charged her with illegal possession of religious literature and fined her nearly 880 euros.
- (2) **Samarkand.** On 19 February 2015, police officers entered the home of a female Witness under the pretext of speaking to her husband. They then searched the home for religious literature.

Police forced the female Witness to write explanatory notes on the source of her personal religious literature, brought her to the police station, and confiscated her mobile phone. Her husband, not one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, was told to write an explanatory note stating that he burned his wife’s religious literature.

In a hearing on 20 March 2015, the Samarkand Criminal Court charged the Witness, who was not present for the hearing, with an administrative offence based on the results of a theological “expert” study performed by the International Islamic Centre of Imam Buhoriy. The appeal court upheld the conviction in its ruling of 16 July 2015.

- (3) **Angren.** On 9 June 2015, a female Witness was detained and taken to the Prosecutor’s Office. She was interrogated and forced to write an explanatory note stating that she is one of Jehovah’s Witnesses and has religious literature at her home. She was prevented from attending the hearing of 23 June 2015 and has not received a copy of the court decision.
- (4) **Tashkent.** On 20 July 2015, six police officers, accompanied by a national security officer and the head of condominium complex, raided and searched the home of a female Witness. All of her personal religious literature was seized along with personal belongings such as her computer.
- (5) **Almalyq.** In July 2015, police raided and searched the home of a female Witness. Officers seized her personal religious literature and submitted the literature for an “expert” study. According to this study, dated 13 July 2015, the seized literature might have led to missionary activity. On 23 July 2015, the judge of the Almalyq District Criminal Court found the Witness guilty of the administrative offence of illegal storage of banned religious literature and fined her approximately 350 euros.

### Societal Abuses and Discrimination

- (1) On 6 January 2015, the 12news.uz news agency published an article by Mr. Roman Seleznev with the headline “When Will the Attacks of Jehovah’s Witnesses End?” The

article was defamatory and contained false information, insulting and slandering Jehovah's Witnesses and inciting religious hatred. Jehovah's Witnesses demanded a retraction from the news agency, and this is still pending.

- (2) **Samarkand.** On 12 March 2015 a defamatory article was published in the *Bekazhon* newspaper in Samarkand, which has a circulation of 50,000. The article contained numerous misconceptions about the Witnesses and made a number of outrageous and slanderous statements. The Witnesses demanded a retraction addressing the most outrageous false statements, and this is still pending.
- (3) **Taxiatosh, Karakalpakstan.** On 28 July 2015, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses gathered together with the sons of the deceased and other relatives. The funeral ceremony was abruptly interrupted by a visit from the police captain, Ruslan Allanazarov; a police officer, Mr. Ondasyn; representatives of the local condominium; and mullah Mr. Tajimurat Orazov.

Representatives of the local condominium and mullah Mr. Tajimurat Orazov were "welcoming" the neighbours, thus preventing them from entering the house of the deceased to offer condolences. The neighbours observed that a camera had been installed across the street from the house—anyone found entering the house would later be fined nearly 350 euros each.

The family of the deceased provided Captain Allanazarov with a letter from the CRA confirming that the CRA had no objection to the funeral arrangements. However, the captain said that regardless of the CRA opinion, the Witnesses should not bury their dead in the Muslim cemetery. After some time, special police squad cars accompanied the attendees to the cemetery, where police officers instructed the family where they should bury the deceased.

### Positive Developments

Over the years there has been some improvement in the attitude of the government of Uzbekistan towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

- In early 2014, the CRA granted approval to import Bibles into Uzbekistan. In early 2015, the CRA indicated that it would allow the Witnesses to have other religious literature for personal use.
- On 3 April 2015, with the assistance of the CRA, Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Uzbekistan held their annual observance of the Memorial of Christ's death without hindrance. Local government officials and representatives of the CRA and of the Ministry of Justice attended the event in Chirchiq. This is the third year that this sacred event has been held throughout the country without major incident.
- None of Jehovah's Witnesses are currently detained for conscientious objection to military service. In response to the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee, the government of Uzbekistan stated: "According to the Law on Military Obligations and Military Service dated 12 December 2002, citizens between 18 and 27 who are enrolled in the military-register and liable for conscription have the right to alternative service if they are part of a registered religious organisation whose beliefs do not permit carrying weapons or serving in the Armed Forces. In Uzbekistan such religious organisations include Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Christian Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists."

### Meetings With Officials

Throughout 2014, and as recently as April 2015, the CRA Chairman Artikbek Yusupov and Deputy Chairman Bekzod Kodirov met with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss their situation in Uzbekistan and the need to allow further registration of their congregations, beginning with the congregation in Tashkent. Jehovah's Witnesses also had constructive dialogue with the CRA and the Tashkent Department of Justice on 6 April 2015, during which the issue of registration was again raised. Further meetings to continue the dialogue with the goal of eventual registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent and in other large cities of Uzbekistan will be arranged at the end of 2015.

#### **Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Uzbekistan to:**

- (1) Grant registration to the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent and in other cities of Uzbekistan
- (2) Stop illegal searches of private homes and seizures of religious literature
- (3) Stop harassing and molesting Jehovah's Witnesses
- (4) Stop arrests and prosecutions for attending religious meetings and for peacefully and respectfully sharing one's belief with others
- (5) Allow religious literature without censorship and access to the international website of Jehovah's Witnesses, [jw.org](http://jw.org)
- (6) Uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the constitution of Uzbekistan and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

***Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Uzbekistan government.***

#### **For more information:**

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at [generalcounsel@jw.org](mailto:generalcounsel@jw.org).

---

Visit the Newsroom at [jw.org](http://jw.org) or scan the QR code below to learn about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

