

WRITTEN STATEMENT ON UZBEKISTAN  
BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES  
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*Legal Status*

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Uzbekistan since the late 1950's. Although there are various congregations and groups of Jehovah's Witnesses in different regions of Uzbekistan, including Tashkent, the only two officially registered congregations were in Chirchik and Fergana. Currently, the Fergana registration has been suspended and the Chirchik registration is now challenged.

The authorities are using the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations as a tool to obstruct the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. In Uzbekistan, annulling registration is tantamount to banning the activities of an organization, since all activities of unregistered organizations are considered illegal. The right to conduct religious services or meetings is only available by law to registered organizations. The law categorizes unregistered religious organizations as "illegal" and prohibits "proselytism" and private religious teaching.

According to officials, individuals may have religious literature only for personal use; it may not be distributed to others. However, since 2006 even this right has been restricted. According to Article 184 of the Uzbekistan Code of Administrative Violations, a person can be brought to administrative responsibility for possessing a personal copy of any publication that was imported into the country without official permission. The Committee for Religious Affairs presented an expert conclusion claiming that it is illegal to distribute the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses outside of Fergana and Chirchik. The current interpretation of the religion law (apparently issuing from the Committee for Religious Affairs) is that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Uzbek language is banned; however, the literature may be used in Russian. Consequently, Uzbek Witnesses are deprived of the right to read religious literature in their own language.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Freedom of peaceful assembly is guaranteed by the Constitution of Uzbekistan, and yet it has been frequently violated. Some individual Witnesses (male and female) are registered by some local law-enforcement agencies as "extremists," and they are closely monitored by regular call-ups and interrogations.

The police and National Security Service (SNB, formerly the KGB) have raided homes of Jehovah's Witnesses, confiscated religious literature, and verbally and physically abused Witnesses and non-Witnesses who were simply attending a peaceful religious meeting in a private home. Often, all in attendance were taken to the police station, where administrative penalties were imposed on many of them. Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses were frequently arrested or fined for talking to others about the Bible or for having religious literature or the Bible in their possession.

There are now over 1,100 documented cases of Jehovah's Witnesses having been arrested, detained, fined, or beaten. More than 700 of those cases occurred on two days, March 24, 2005, and April 12, 2006, which were both the annual religious observance by Jehovah's Witnesses of the Memorial of Christ's death. On those two days, coordinated, nationwide police raids were directed against Jehovah's Witnesses. Baton-wielding police arrived in buses to arrest all in attendance at many locations where Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting.

### 2006 Memorial

On April 12, 2006, police raids occurred in Almalyk, Bekabad, Fergana, Karshi, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Urgench, among other locations. In total there were at least 589 incidents of police detention in 13 different locations following these raids on the Memorial observances. There were several incidents of police brutality accompanying the interference.

When the attorney representing these Witnesses arrived by plane from Russia, he was denied entry and was deported. During April and May 2006, Witnesses who were arrested at the Memorial observances were found guilty of administrative violations and fined. Most often their appeals were dismissed. In Karshi, two men who are Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to five days' detention for their role in the Memorial observance.

- On June 5, 2006, in Karshi, in one case, the court of first instance found all ten defendants guilty under Article 240(1). Three, including one man who was only associating with Jehovah's Witnesses, were sentenced to detention for five days. One Witness was sentenced to detention for seven days. Four of the others were fined 470,000 som (\$427 U.S.) each; two, approximately 282,000 som (\$256 U.S.) and 94,000 (\$85 U.S.). All decisions were appealed.
- The final case in Karshi received its decision on June 9, 2006. Alisher Ruziyev and Ikrom Boltayev were found guilty under Article 240(1) and 240(2), and they were fined 470,000 som (\$427 U.S.). Both decisions were appealed.

### 2007 Memorial

Considering the record of the past two years, Jehovah's Witnesses were concerned that the police raids would be repeated during the 2007 Memorial of Christ's death, which was scheduled for April 2, 2007. In anticipation of this sacred event, Jehovah's Witnesses sent letters to and had face-to-face meetings with various Uzbekistan officials.

- On March 15, 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses met with Mr. Bakhtier Ibragimov at the Uzbekistan Embassy in Washington, D.C. They presented him with a letter to Foreign Minister Norov requesting a guarantee from the Uzbekistan government that there would be no police interference with our Memorial observance this year. A copy of the letter was sent to the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the Uzbekistan Ambassador in Washington, D.C., and the Uzbekistan Ombudsman.
- Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses from Belgium, Russia, and the United States traveled to Uzbekistan and were present at the Memorial observance in Chirchik where the work of Jehovah's Witnesses is still registered. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy attended the religious observance at different locations in Tashkent. Jehovah's Witnesses peacefully carried out their religious celebration without police interference.
- There were only a few reports of police interference with the 2007 Memorial observance in Uzbekistan. In a few cases, police showed up at the locations for the Memorial and looked at the personal documents of those in attendance. However, the religious celebration was allowed to proceed.

### Criminal Cases in Samarkand Against Jehovah's Witnesses

Among the hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses detained in connection with the 2006 Memorial observance, Irfon Khamidov was found guilty on April 21, 2006, of administrative violations by

the Samarkand City Court for conducting one of the Memorial observances. The decision was appealed but was upheld by the Samarkand Regional Court on May 23, 2006. This served as the backdrop to opening a criminal case against him within the year. Criminal cases have also been lodged against other Witnesses in Samarkand, as detailed below.

- On February 11, 2007, Dilafruz Arziyeva was detained while sharing her faith with others, and a criminal case was instigated against her under Article 216(1) of the Criminal Code for “incitement to participate in the activity of illegal public associations and religious organizations.” Allegedly this was the second time that she committed a violation within the past year, although there are no details on when the first administrative infraction may have taken place.
- On February 15, 2007, a criminal case was instigated against Arziyeva, and on April 3, 2007, the Samarkand City Prosecutor’s Office ordered the charges to be amended to Article 229(2) of the Criminal Code—Teaching Religious Beliefs.
- On March 1, 2007, a criminal case was instigated against Irfon Khamidov. He was charged under Article 216(1) of the Criminal Code. After the initial investigation, the prosecutor requested that the charges be amended to Article 229(2)—Teaching Religious Beliefs. Khamidov is a citizen of Tajikistan with residence in Uzbekistan. He is married and has one child.
- On May 14, 2007, a hearing took place in the Samarkand City Court regarding the criminal charges against Khamidov. Two of the “witnesses” summoned to testify against Khamidov acknowledged that they had never seen him before, and that he had never taught religion to them. An advocate who was supposedly involved in the early stages of the investigation testified that he had not participated and that his signature on the case documents was forged. Despite these irregularities, the Samarkand City Court found Khamidov guilty and sentenced him to two years of imprisonment for violating Article 229(2) of the Criminal Code. The decision was appealed. At first, nobody was allowed to see Khamidov.
- On May 28, 2007, Khamidov’s attorney was finally allowed to spend time with him in his prison cell in Katakurgan Detention Center. He learned that, while Khamidov was in pre-trial custody in the Samarkand Pre-trial Detention Center, he was badly beaten on three occasions by Investigator Rasulov, who demanded details about other Jehovah’s Witnesses in Samarkand. On one occasion the beating lasted for an hour. Khamidov’s attorney could still see the bruising from the beatings on various parts of his client’s body.
- On June 6, 2007, Arziyeva was sentenced by the Samarkand City Court to two years of correctional labor, with 20 percent of her salary to be paid to the State for the period of her sentence. During the hearing, motions were filed by Arziyeva’s attorney for a representative of the Samarkand Region Justice Department and a religious expert to be called to give evidence. These motions were granted by the judge, but not honored. The Justice Department informed the court that they would not attend the hearing because they considered that there was no need for them to get involved in the case. Several other motions were dismissed by the judge with no reasons given, and when witnesses summoned for questioning failed to appear at the hearing, the judge gave no reason for their failure to appear.

#### Detention of Literature Shipment

- On August 22, 2006, Tashkent Customs detained a shipment of 500 Russian Bibles and 500 copies of the book *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* in Russian. This literature shipment has

been in storage since its detention because the Committee of Religious Affairs has not given its permission for clearance.

- On October 16, 2006, the Committee for Religious Affairs sent Jehovah's Witnesses an official response. The reason given for rejecting this shipment was that officials did not see the need for this literature, since there is only one registered organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan. Following this rejection, customs officials proposed three options to resolve the situation: (1) Return the shipment to Germany (its origin), (2) reroute the shipment to Kazakhstan, or (3) destroy the shipment. Jehovah's Witnesses requested that the literature be forwarded to Kazakhstan.
- On October 27, 2006, Jehovah's Witnesses of Germany (the shipper) promptly sent permission to Tashkent Customs to reroute the shipment to Kazakhstan. However, the literature has still not been rerouted to Kazakhstan and is detained in Tashkent Customs.

Storage charges have accumulated that are prohibitive.

- On January 2, 2007, Mr. Bakhtier Ibragimov of the Uzbekistan Embassy informed Jehovah's Witnesses that Mr. Vladimir Norov of the Uzbekistan Foreign Ministry had given consent to release the impounded literature to Kazakhstan. There was no mention of storage fees.
- Local representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses have been told that they must pay about \$6,000 U.S. to the customs services for storage costs before the literature will be released. However, in the past officially imported Bibles and books have always been accepted as a humanitarian gift and payment was not required. In this case, since the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Uzbekistan was responsible for the long delay in handling the matter, it is unreasonable to demand payment from Jehovah's Witnesses.