



Uzbekistan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, the 1998 Religion Law restricts many rights only to registered religious groups and limits which groups may register. Violators of the law's prohibitions on activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction are subject to criminal penalties.

Despite an improved atmosphere in most Muslim communities in recent years, respect for religious freedom declined in several areas during the reporting period. The number of individuals imprisoned for membership in extremist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) appeared to decrease for the second year in a row; however, the Government appeared to shift its focus to Nur, a Turkish Muslim group, arresting at least 42 alleged Nur members and sentencing many of them to prison terms ranging from six to 12 years. The Government did not interfere with worshippers at sanctioned mosques and permitted the operation of other religious groups it considered mainstream. Some minority religious groups remained unregistered because they were unable to satisfy the strict registration requirements set out by the law. These groups, particularly those perceived as engaging in proselytism, experienced raids, harassment, and the detention of their leaders and members; some faced criminal charges.

Uzbek society is generally tolerant of religious groups, and religious groups are generally tolerant of each other. Neighbors, family, and employers sometimes pressure ethnic Uzbek Christians, however, especially recent converts and residents of smaller communities. Some minority religious groups face continued negative media coverage, as well.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy remained engaged in monitoring and promoting religious freedom and maintained contact with government and religious leaders and human rights activists. On January 16, 2009, the Secretary of State re-designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 172,742 square miles and a population of 28.2 million. International experts believe that between two and three million Uzbeks have migrated, many seasonally, to find work in neighboring countries, particularly Russia and Kazakhstan. However, this trend was expected to decrease in 2009 due to the region's slowing economy. 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.

No official statistics exist on membership in religious groups; however, an estimated 90 percent of the population is nominally Sunni Muslim, of the Hanafi school. Shi'a Muslims, who are concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand, constitute an estimated 1 percent of the population. Approximately 5 percent is Russian Orthodox, a percentage that declines as ethnic Russians and other Slavs continue to emigrate. The remaining 3 percent 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, as well as atheists. In addition, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews remain, concentrated in the cities of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. At least 80,000 Jews emigrated to Israel and the United States over the past two decades, mainly for economic reasons.

As of May 15, 2008, the Government had registered 2,228 religious congregations and organizations--an increase of 1 from the 2,227 recorded in May 2007. Mosques, Muslim educational institutions, and Islamic centers accounted for 2,048 of the total, an increase of two. Among the Muslim groups were several Shi'a congregations. The number of registered Christian groups decreased by one. The 180 registered minority religious groups included 58 Korean Christian, 36 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 21 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 10 Seventh-day Adventist, eight Jewish, five Roman Catholic, six Baha'i, three Lutheran, four "New Apostolic," two Armenian Apostolic, one Jehovah's Witnesses, one Krishna Consciousness group, one Temple of Buddha, and one Christian "Voice of God" Church. In addition, there were a number of unregistered religious groups. The Government did not provide updated information for 2009.

A growing percentage of Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents actively practice their religion. Outside Tashkent, practicing Muslims outnumber nonpracticing Muslims. In the past few years, mosque attendance has increased, particularly among younger men, who constitute the majority of worshipers.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government and laws restrict 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.

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 grants those rights only to registered groups. It also 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 Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), a government agency accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve all religious literature.

The 1998 Religion Law requires all religious groups to register and provides strict and burdensome criteria for registration. Among its requirements, the law stipulates that each group must present a list of at least 100 citizen members to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The CRA oversees registered religious activity.

The law prohibits religious groups from training religious personnel if the group does not have a registered central administrative body. Registration of a central body requires registered religious groups in eight of the 13 provinces, an impossible requirement for most minority religious groups. 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 religious instruction and provides for fines for violations. The law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. Article 14 of the Religion Law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except "those serving in religious organizations."

The Criminal Code and Code on Administrative Responsibility 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 Criminal Code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those that are not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups viewed as extremist, which the Government bans 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 20 years in prison for "organizing or participating" in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups.

The main laws under which authorities charge citizens for religious activity are article 159 (anticonstitutional 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 that 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 Criminal Code.

December 2005 amendments to both the Criminal Code (article 217, section 2) and Administrative Code (article 201) raised fines for repeated offenses of violations of the law on religious activity to 200 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage of \$19 (28,040 soums) under the Criminal Code and 50 to 100 times the minimum wage under the Administrative Code.

Authorities also use four provisions of the Administrative Code to impose administrative penalties for violations of laws regulating religious activities. Article 201 of the Administrative Code imposes fines on violators of the law on how religious organizations should operate as well as for holding illegal public rallies, marches, and demonstrations. Article 202 imposes fines for "creating the conditions" for holding unsanctioned meetings. Article 240 of the Administrative Code imposes administrative fines for violating the Religion Law, and article 241 imposes fines for "teaching religious doctrines without specialist religious education and without the permission of an agency of the central administration of a religious organization, and equally teaching religious doctrines in a private capacity."

June 2006 amendments to the Administrative Code punish "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." Criminal Code article 244, section 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 three years. Other changes introduced simultaneously to the Criminal and Administrative Codes punish those convicted of the production and distribution of "literature promoting racial and religious hatred."

Although the law treats all centrally registered religious denominations equally, the Government funds an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The Government provided logistical support for selected Muslims to participate in the December 2008 Hajj, but pilgrims pay their own expenses. The Government controls the Muftiate, which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials. The Kurbon Hayit and Roza Hayit Islamic holy days are observed as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were significant governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the reporting period. The Government, by continuing to deny registration to some religious groups, effectively deprived them of their legal right to worship, as provided for in the Constitution. The Government restricted many religious practices and activities, punishing some citizens because they engaged in religious practices in violation of registration laws.

The Government bans Islamic organizations it deems extremist and criminalizes membership in them. Chief among the banned organizations are Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), Akromiya, Tabligh Jamaat, Nur, and groups the Government broadly labeled "Wahhabi." The Government states that it does not consider repression of persons or groups suspected of extremism to be a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing armed resistance to the Government.

HT is an extremist Islamist political organization motivated by a socioreligious ideology. Its literature lays out a three-stage campaign for the establishment of a worldwide Islamic Caliphate. Although HT maintains that it is nonviolent, it has repeatedly praised or justified acts of armed jihad and instances of terrorism. Its literature strongly suggests that the organization might at some point resort to armed action. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature and websites call for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia. Authorities' actions to suppress HT and prosecute its members are based on the group's political activity and are not a restriction on religious freedom per se. However, convictions of individuals associated with HT and similar organizations have lacked due process and have also involved credible allegations of torture. Chief among those targeted for prosecution during the reporting period were relatives and associates of individuals already imprisoned for membership in HT.

The Government has repressed and prosecuted members of "Akromiya" (Akromiylar) since 1997. Religious experts claim that Akromiya is an informal association that promotes business along the lines of Islamic religious principles, while the Government claims that the group is a branch or splinter of HT and that it attempted, with the terrorist group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), to overthrow the Government through armed rebellion in Andijon in May 2005.

Tabligh Jamaat, an Islamic missionary group with origins in South Asia, follows worship, dress, and grooming practices based on practices from the time of the Prophet Muhammad; its members claim to be exclusively religious and apolitical.

Nur was founded by Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi after World War I and promoted the adoption of Shari'a (Islamic law) in Turkey. In recent years, Nur has become associated with the religious and Pan-Turkish ideology of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gullen, who resides in the United States. After the Central Asian states gained independence, Gullen supported the opening of Turkish high schools throughout Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. Nur's publications were freely available in Uzbekistan in the 1990s. The Turkish schools continue to operate elsewhere in Central Asia, but authorities forced the Uzbek Turkish schools to close in 1999 following a series of bombings in Tashkent blamed on a former Uzbek opposition figure who was living in Turkey at the time. In the same year, the Government harassed and imprisoned some Nur members in a general crackdown on independent Muslim activity.

During the reporting period, authorities initiated a widespread crackdown on suspected Nur members, leading to dozens of arrests and imprisonments. The Uzbek Religious Affairs Committee (RAC) listed Nur as a banned religious organization. Outside the country, views of Nur's ideology range from progressive to conservative; the group has consistently condemned violent extremism.

The RAC also bans alleged "Wahhabists," a term the Government uses to describe Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derive from the strict teachings of prominent imams of the early 1990s. Imams Nazarov, Parpiev, and Mirzaev are among these. Nazarov was granted political asylum abroad; the others disappeared in custody. The

Government remains deeply suspicious of Muslims who worship outside state-approved institutions, who were educated at madrassahs abroad, or who are tied to known "Wahhabi" imams.

The RAC also bans as extremist eight lesser-known religiously-based organizations. In addition, the Government bans participation in terrorist organizations, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).

New mosques continued to face difficulties gaining registration, as did those that reapplied after previously being closed. Several mosques in the southern and eastern Ferghana Valley that had reported registration problems in past years remained unregistered despite having the required number of congregants. A number of unofficial, independent mosques were allowed to operate quietly under the watch of official imams. Authorities also permitted the activities of an unregistered kanaka (Sufi monastery) in the Ferghana Valley town of Kokand. The Government from time to time promoted Sufism, particularly the native Naqshbandi order, as an alternative to what it perceived as extreme forms of Islam imported from abroad.

Minority religious groups continued to have difficulties registering in the reporting period. The Jehovah's Witnesses applied for registration at local, regional, and national levels and received either a denial or no official answer during the period covered by this report. Since 1996, the Jehovah's Witnesses have attempted to register congregations in Tashkent on at least 23 separate occasions and to register congregations in the provinces on 13 separate occasions. Of the several Jehovah's Witnesses groups in the country, only one, in Chirchik, had registration status at the end of the reporting period.

In October 2008, the Tashkent City Justice Department, citing technicalities, rejected the latest application for registration from the Eskhol Full Gospel Church in Tashkent. The Church was earlier denied registration on July 22, 2008, after the Tashkent City Justice Department rejected letters of support the Church had procured from the Chilanzar district Hokimiyat (administration) and the mahalla (neighborhood) committee, claiming that the letters did not "correspond to official requirements." Authorities had denied registration to the Church on three previous occasions.

No Baptist church has successfully registered in the country since 1999. In 2006, the Baptist Union Church in Urgench in Khorezm Province was stripped of its registration. Baptist Union Churches in Gulistan in Syrdarya Province and in Gazalkent, Krasnogorsk, and Toy Tepa in Tashkent Province have attempted to register several times in the past few years without success.

Other churches remained unregistered after unsuccessful past efforts to register. These include Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Gulistan; the Pentecostal Church in Andijon; and the Adventist Church, Greater Grace Christian Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand.

There was no update in the case of the Grace Presbyterian Church of Tashkent, which was stripped of its registration in 2007 and ceased regular worship in 2008.

Religious activity remained particularly difficult in Karakalpakstan, as no non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities had official registration status. The last registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, Emmanuel Pentecostal Church, lost its registration in 2005. More than 20 Protestant and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in the region have been refused legal status, making their activity illegal.

During the reporting period, many churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, did not apply or reapply for registration because they did not expect local officials to register them. Other groups, including

those with too few members, reported that they preferred not to bring themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously would not meet legal requirements. Some groups did not want to give the authorities a list of their members, especially ethnic Uzbeks, as they were harassed during previous attempts to register. A few groups refused on principle to seek registration because they challenge the Government's right to require it.

To register, a group must report in its charter a valid legal address. In previous reporting periods, local officials denied approval of legal addresses or did not answer such requests, thus preventing religious groups from registering. The MOJ also cited this requirement in explaining local officials' decisions. Some groups, such as the Tashkent International Church, were reluctant to purchase property without assurance that their registration would be approved. Others claimed that local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

Other problems that have prevented registration include claims of falsified congregation lists; problems certifying addresses; improper certification by fire inspectors, sanitation workers, and epidemiologists; grammatical errors in the Uzbek text of a group's charter; and other technicalities.

Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners enjoy greater freedom to choose and change their religion than do members of Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks. Most Christian churches can operate freely as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks.

The private teaching of religious principles and the teaching of religion to minors without parental consent is illegal. Only a religious group with a registered central office may legally provide religious instruction.

There are 11 madrassahs (including two for women), which provide secondary education including a full range of secular subjects. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. In addition, the Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher education. The curriculum in the madrassahs and Islamic Institute is oriented toward those planning to become imams or religious teachers. At the government-funded and -established Tashkent Islamic University, students pursue religious studies from a secular perspective, which does not qualify graduates to practice as imams; however, some graduates of the university have been appointed as imams after pursuing a standard sequence of study at a madrassah.

Apart from full-time study in these institutions, there is no officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam. Two madrassahs in the Ferghana Valley remained closed after the Government converted them into medical facilities in previous years. An increasing number of imams informally offer religious education; although this is technically illegal, local authorities took legal action only in rare instances.

The Government restricts Shi'a Islamic education by not permitting the separate training of Shi'a imams inside the country and not recognizing such education received outside the country. However, Shi'a imams are educated in Sunni madrassahs, which offer some courses in Shi'a jurisprudence. 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. Other religious groups offer religious education through their religious centers. The Jewish community has no rabbinate because it does not have synagogues in eight different provinces and therefore cannot meet the requirements for a registered central office; however, the Jewish school in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy District provides instruction on Jewish culture.

Local officials and representatives of the religious establishment continued to express apprehension over the proselytizing activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. Foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) accused by the

Government of proselytizing remained closed, along with most other foreign NGOs. A 2003 decree of the Cabinet of Ministers outlining a change in registration requirements for NGOs restricted the activities of faith-based entities, and the 1998 Religion Law prohibits "actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing) as well as any other missionary activity." The MOJ controls accreditation, a necessity for any foreigner attempting to work for an NGO in the country. This control allows the Government to force out, without bringing formal charges, those it believes are proselytizing.

During the reporting period, several expatriate staff members of NGOs were deported for suspected missionary activity. In February 2009, authorities forced the departure of three U.S. citizens associated with the New Hope faith-based humanitarian assistance NGO, which provides medical care to disabled persons in Tashkent. The U.S. citizens were accused of violating unspecified laws and were given two weeks to leave the country. They denied being engaged in missionary activity.

On December 1, 2008, the MOJ re-registered the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which provides humanitarian aid. In April 2008, a ministry official publicly accused the JDC of violating the law and threatened to de-register the organization. There was no update in the case of Rabbi David Gurevich -- a dual American-Israeli citizen and Head Emissary of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement -- who was deported in June 2008 after the MOJ refused to renew his accreditation and visa. The Lubavitch synagogue remained open under another rabbi but without its longtime spiritual leader. Both actions appear to have resulted from factors unrelated to religious freedom.

There was no update in the case of an evangelical church in Samarkand run by South Koreans that lost its accreditation in April 2008 after the MOJ accused it of conducting unauthorized missionary work.

Sources reported that Government instructed mahalla (neighborhood) committees and imams to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion. The Government controlled the content of imams' sermons and the volume and content of published Islamic materials.

Sources have reported an improved atmosphere in the Muslim community in recent years, with worshippers at many mosques overflowing into the streets for lack of space during Friday prayers. Observant Muslims appeared to be able to display their faith in public more freely. Large numbers of school-age children also were observed attending Friday prayers, although some sources reported that officials were attempting to limit the access of children to mosques.

There were credible reports that the security services continued their covert surveillance of Christian religious communities.

State-controlled media in some cases encouraged prejudice against certain minority religious groups. During the reporting period, state-controlled media accused missionaries of posing a danger to society and equated them with religious extremists. Government officials also held meetings at universities and schools in different regions of the country warning students about the "negative consequences of missionaries and religious extremism."

In March 2009 a documentary aired on state-controlled television titled "The Beam, Leading to Darkness," which focused on Nur. The report described Nur as an extremist sect that aims to establish a pan-Turkic state and claimed its activities "undermine our centuries-old values." The documentary concluded by noting that courts convicted eight individuals of Nur membership on February 16, 2009, and sentenced them to up to eight years in prison.

In February 2009, a documentary aired on Uzbek state-controlled television described Nur as "an extremist sect"

that "seeks to establish a pan-Turkic state in Eurasia." The documentary reported that the Government closed Uzbek-Turkish high schools in Uzbekistan in the late 1990s for allegedly disseminating Nur propaganda and alleged that the schools' graduates resumed Nur's activities in Uzbekistan in 2006. Many of those arrested and imprisoned in the crackdown were Uzbek-Turkish high school graduates.

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), National Security Service (NSS), Customs Service, and local police may suppress or confiscate religious literature. The Religion Law restricts the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious organizations, of which seven existed: an interdenominational Bible Society; the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan; two Islamic centers; and Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic offices. The Government may confiscate and in some cases destroy illegally imported religious literature.

During the reporting period, the Government restricted the quantity of Christian literature in Uzbek that registered central religious organizations could import. An Uzbekistan Bible Society shipment of approximately 11,000 religious books and brochures--to which the CRA refused to grant importation permission in May 2008, claiming that the Bible Society had not properly notified authorities about the shipment--remained impounded, as did a 2006 shipment of Jehovah's Witnesses literature. Authorities also confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, Christian literature in Uzbek and Russian that had been legally imported. For historical and cultural reasons, evangelical pastors generally preach in Russian while offering limited services in Uzbek, the official national language and the one linked most closely to the majority Muslim population. In previous reporting periods, the CRA allowed some materials, such as limited quantities of Uzbek translations of some books of the Bible, to be imported. The Government requires the Bible Society to file regular reports on its printing, importing, and translating activities.

The International Post Office in Tashkent continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send examples of any religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. When the CRA bans the materials, it mails a letter to the intended recipient and the sender explaining the rejection. The CRA has denied entry of both Christian and Muslim titles.

The Government tightly controlled access to Muslim publications and required a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, compact discs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Many books were published with the phrase "permission for this book was granted by the CRA" or "this book is recommended by the CRA," 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 few imported works in Arabic are sometimes available from book dealers. More controversial literature is not displayed, but available only upon request. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists, or of any literature illegally imported or produced, may lead to arrest and prosecution. The Government categorically prohibited HT leaflets and Nur literature.

The Government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,000, or approximately 20 percent of the country's allowed number of pilgrims (estimated at approximately 25,000 pilgrims or 1,000 pilgrims for every 1 million of population). An additional 4,000 pilgrims traveled on the Umrah (small Hajj). Local mahalla committees, district administrations, the National Security Service, and the state-run Hajj Commission, which is controlled by the RAC and the Muftiate, were all reportedly involved in vetting potential pilgrims, subject to a blacklist.

While a growing number of government employees attend Friday prayers, they generally display less religious devotion than do citizens in the private sector. The state maintains a policy of secularism, and government employees are careful to maintain the separation between religion and state structures.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to commit serious abuses of religious freedom in its campaign against extremist or independent Islamic organizations. In many cases authorities severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of extremism, using torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions. A significant number of individuals were imprisoned for Nur membership, as the Government apparently shifted its focus from HT to Nur. The total number of individuals convicted for HT membership appeared to drop in the last few years. The Government took a number of administrative steps aimed at eliminating torture in detention. While there were several reports of prison conditions improving for those convicted of religious extremism, abuses continued. Most defendants received sentences ranging from three to 14 years; some received sentences of 16 to 20 years.

In previous reporting periods, sources noted that some prisoners convicted of religious extremism were held separately from "ordinary" prisoners and received harsher treatment from prison guards. In the past two reporting periods, there were several reports that authorities reintegrated religious prisoners with other inmates in several prisons and that conditions had improved at some facilities. There were also reports of inmates convicted of religious extremism dying from tuberculosis (TB) and other diseases.

In November 2008, alleged Akromiya member Khoshimjon Kadirov was arrested in Andijon and transferred to Ministry of Interior custody in Tashkent, where he was reportedly beaten to death.

On February 27, 2009, independent news websites reported that Sohob Sidikov, who was sentenced to 17 years' imprisonment in 1999 on religious extremism charges, died of TB at the Sangorod prison hospital in Tashkent, where he was receiving treatment after being transferred from prison 64/36 in Navoi province. His body was delivered to his family in Kokand on February 23.

On January 30, 2009, an independent activist reported that Abdulatif Ayupov, who was sentenced in 2006 to 11 years' imprisonment for HT membership, died of TB at Sangorod. In September 2008 Ayupov was reportedly transferred from prison 64/36 in Navoi Province for treatment. Ayupov reportedly contracted TB in prison.

On January 22, 2009, independent websites reported the deaths from unknown illnesses of inmates Muhammad Artykov, who was reportedly one of 23 Akromiya businessmen involved in the trial that sparked the 2005 Andijon events, and Abdurahmon Kuchkarov, an alleged participant in the Andijon events.

There were no updates in the following cases of inmates convicted of religious extremism who died under unclear circumstances: the May 2008 case of Odil Azizov and the November 2007 cases of Fitrat Salakhiddinov and Takhir Nurmukhammedov, all of whose relatives reported finding signs of torture on the bodies.

Between August 2008 and the end of the reporting period, at least 16 individuals were imprisoned for Nur membership, and at least 26 other individuals were arrested. Suspected Nur members had been imprisoned before, but never in such numbers. Some of the cases involved allegations of torture and coercion.

In April 2009 the Tashkent City Criminal Court convicted three individuals associated with the Yeti Iqlim newspaper of membership in Nur. Journalist Davron Tojiev and distributor Shavkat Ismoilov were sentenced to eight years' imprisonment, and Namangan-based imam Mamadali Shahobiddinov received a 12-year sentence.

On March 6, 2009, the independent Harakat.net website reported that four individuals suspected of Nur membership, including Muhammadjon Sobirov, had been arrested in Namangan. Their fate remained unknown at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2009 the independent Ezgulik human rights group reported that 12 suspected Nur members were arrested in Khorezm Province. Their fate remained unknown at the end of the reporting period.

On February 26, 2009, the Tashkent City Criminal Court sentenced five men associated with Irmoq magazine -- Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Ravshanbek Vafojev, U.S. exchange program alumnus Abdulaziz Dadahanov, and Botirbek Eshkuziyev -- to between eight and 12 years' imprisonment for membership in Nur. The defendants reportedly testified in court that they had been tortured in pretrial detention and that evidence against them had been fabricated. On April 1, 2009, the Tashkent City Criminal Court rejected the defendants' appeal. The individuals associated with Irmoq were reportedly arrested in August 2008.

On February 17, 2009, Harakat.net reported that Mansurali Arraboev, an instructor at Tashkent's Islamic Institute, was arrested for suspected Nur membership. His fate remained unknown at the end of the reporting period.

On February 16, 2009, a court sentenced eight individuals--Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiyev, Olimjon Musayev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov, and Bakht Abdugaffarov--to six and one-half to eight years' imprisonment for membership in Nur.

On December 22, 2008, law enforcement officials in Bukhara raided the home of Ikrom Merajov, a university lecturer, and confiscated religious literature. Merajov and eight other men -- Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamuradov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov, and Shuhrat Karimov -- were charged with membership in Nur and were in pretrial detention in Bukhara at the end of the reporting period. A few days after the raid, another unidentified man was reportedly arrested in Bukhara on the same charges. Merajov's arrest was reported in the February 2009 documentary that aired on state-controlled television.

The number of known cases of arrest or detention based on alleged membership in the religious extremist organization HT appeared to decline for the second consecutive year. In an April 2009 report, the Moscow-based Memorial human rights group released a list of 1,452 individuals prosecuted by GOU officials on allegedly politically motivated charges between 2004 and 2008. Nearly 95 percent of them were charged with religious extremism, many for alleged HT membership. The report cited 38 trials involving multiple religious extremism suspects in 2004, 54 in 2005, 43 in 2006, 18 in 2007, and 10 in 2008. It was impossible to verify the number of prisoners in detention for alleged HT membership; estimates from previous reporting periods were as high as 4,500.

There were continued reports that shortly before their release, prisoners convicted of religious extremism were retried for organizing extremist cells within prison or other offenses and had their prison terms extended. There were also a few reports of individuals who were convicted of religious extremism being released upon finishing their sentences.

On March 22, 2009, an independent activist reported that Ruslan Jubathanov, who was originally sentenced to nine years' imprisonment for allegedly disseminating HT literature in 2000, had his sentence extended by another three and one-half years after being convicted in the Navoi criminal court of "insubordination in prison" shortly before he was due to be released. Jubathanov's lawyer was reportedly not informed about the proceedings against his client until after a verdict had been issued.

On January 28, 2009, an independent website reported that prison authorities arbitrarily extended by two years the sentence of Ibrohimjon Umarov, who was imprisoned on religious extremism charges in 1999 and was set to complete his original sentence at the end of 2008. He was then reportedly transferred from Tavaksay prison in Tashkent Province to a prison in Karshi in Kashkadarya Province.

In September 2008, authorities extended by 16 and one-half years the sentence for religious extremism of Habibullah Madmarov, son of Margilan-based human rights activist Akhmadjan Madmarov, after convicting him of forming an extremist conspiracy while in prison in Navoi Province. Several other inmates at the same prison reportedly had their sentences extended. On June 26, 2009, authorities released another of Madmarov's sons on parole after he completed a seven-year sentence, but one other son and two nephews of Madmarov remained in prison; all were charged with religious extremism.

On April 20, 2009, Mukhsin Mukhsinov, who had been convicted of membership in a "Wahhabi" extremist sect, was released from prison. He reported to the independent Harakat.net website that additional prisoners convicted of religious extremism had also been recently released from prison.

While prisons had special areas set aside for inmates to pray and prison libraries had copies of the Qur'an and the Bible, there were reports that prison authorities did not allow some prisoners suspected of Islamic extremism to practice their religion freely, not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. There were also reports that prisoners were punished for "violating internal prison regulations" by praying at certain times of the day.

On September 26, 2008, the Karakalpak court dropped religious extremism charges against a Protestant from Nukus, Aitmurat Khayburahmanov, who had been arrested and beaten in June 2008 on criminal charges of teaching religion illegally and participating in a "religious extremist" organization.

During the reporting period, at least 31 persons, including 12 women, were imprisoned for HT membership. Several other women received suspended sentences. State-controlled media reported that many other individuals were arrested on charges of HT membership during the reporting period. In some instances, the individuals were reportedly released without charge, but the fate of the majority was unknown. Some cases involved allegations of torture and coercion. Observers were not able to attend all of the trials. At least 11 other persons were imprisoned after being convicted of membership in "Wahhabi" or other religious extremist organizations. It remained unclear how many more cases went unreported.

On February 4, 2009, the Tashkent City Court sentenced three women--Shakhlo Sultanova, Mashkura Manapova, and Gulnora Hakimova--to six years' imprisonment for membership in HT. Eight other women were convicted on the same charge but received three-year suspended sentences. Relatives reported that after Sultanova was arrested in Tashkent in November 2008, she was beaten by police.

On December 28, 2008, the Tashkent City Prosecutor indicted three women for HT membership: Rano Abzalova, Halida Nurmatova, and Dono Gulombekova. An independent activist who monitored their trial reported that the women, who were eventually convicted and received one-year prison terms, testified that they read the Qur'an but denied HT membership. The principal evidence used against them was reportedly the testimony of acquaintances who had already been convicted of HT membership.

Many of those imprisoned for HT membership during the reporting period were relatives or acquaintances of those already imprisoned for HT membership. Many were women, who typically receive shorter prison sentences than men. Women accused of religious extremism were more likely to be given suspended sentences, amnestied, or released without charge--a general practice that applied to women charged with most crimes, not only those accused of religious extremism. During the reporting period, state-controlled media ran articles and broadcast programs specifically warning women about the danger of religious extremism and featuring testimonies from female former religious extremists.

The Government continued to pursue the extradition of suspected Uzbek religious extremists from third countries,

particularly from Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine, including those who had sought asylum. During the reporting period, at least two individuals seeking political asylum in Kyrgyzstan were forcibly extradited to Uzbekistan and imprisoned on religious extremism charges.

On February 24, 2009, the Tashkent City Criminal Court sentenced Haitjon Juraboev, a religious extremist suspect whom Kyrgyz authorities extradited to Uzbekistan in September 2008, to 13 years' imprisonment on charges of religious extremism and illegal border crossing. On March 17, the Tashkent Criminal Court rejected Juraboev's appeal. While in Kyrgyzstan, Juraboev was registered as an asylum seeker with the Kyrgyz State Committee for Migration and Employment. Human Rights Watch also reported that Juraboev was granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Bishkek. Juraboev is the son-in-law of Obidkhan Alikhanov, an Uzbek imam who was imprisoned on religious extremism charges in the early 1990s.

On September 29, 2008, the Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court convicted Erkin Kholikov of "Islamic extremism and terrorism" and sentenced him to 20 years' imprisonment. Nine other individuals were convicted and imprisoned in the same trial. In May 2008, the Kyrgyz Government extradited Kholikov, an asylum seeker who was imprisoned in Kyrgyzstan on charges of illegal border crossing and failing to report a crime.

There were no updates in the numerous cases of individuals convicted of membership in HT and other extremist organizations in previous reporting periods, including the following cases:

The June 2008 sentencing of two women--Ugibi Mizayev and Rano Akhrokhodzhayeva--to five years' imprisonment for membership in HT, recruitment of HT members, and dissemination of extremist literature.

The February 2008 sentencing of 13 individuals to between 16 and 20 years in prison on charges of membership in a religious extremist organization, with allegations that at least one confession was obtained under duress.

The January 2008 sentencing of Alisher Ubaydullayev to five years' imprisonment for membership in an extremist organization, based on accusations of spreading Wahhabi ideas and on his participation in an antigovernment rally outside the Uzbek embassy in London in 2005.

The December 2007 conviction of three men of membership in Tablighi Jamaat and sentencing of each to between 11 and 14 years in prison.

The October 2007 sentencing of eight men to between three and 10 years' imprisonment for membership in HT. According to human rights activists, police tortured them during pretrial investigation.

The July 2007 sentencing of Dilnoza Tokhtakhodjaeva to three years' imprisonment and six other women to two-year suspended sentences for membership in HT. All of the women were reportedly subjected to psychological pressure and threats.

There were no developments in the following cases from previous years of individuals convicted of membership in HT and other banned religious groups: the April 2007 case of six men in Surkhundarya Province, who were sentenced to between three and six years' imprisonment for membership in a Wahhabi sect and whose confessions were reportedly extracted through torture; the April 2007 case of Gulnora Valijonova, who was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for HT membership based on reportedly insubstantial evidence; the October 2006 case of three defendants in Samarkand who were sentenced to between three and eight years' imprisonment for HT membership after a trial in which several defendants alleged that their testimony had been coerced through torture; the September 2006 case of seven men sentenced to between 10 and 13 years' imprisonment for HT membership who confessed after allegedly being threatened by authorities; the August 2006 case of 29 men in

Tashkent Province who were sentenced to between one and 13 years' imprisonment for HT membership after two separate trials in which several defendants testified that their confessions had been coerced through severe beatings; and the August 2006 case of five men sentenced to between 12 and 15 years' imprisonment in Tashkent in which the men alleged in open court that they had been tortured.

There were no further developments in the case of former Tashkent Imam Rukhitdin Fakhruddinov, who was sentenced in September 2006 to 17 years in prison on charges of extremism and involvement in the 1999 Tashkent car bombings, or of seven other followers of Imam Abidkhan Nazarov who were sentenced in July 2006 to an average of six years' imprisonment on charges of Islamic extremism.

The Government continued to pressure persons suspected of involvement in the Islamic group Akromiya. There were no further developments in the following cases of individuals convicted of Akromiya membership in previous reporting periods: Anvarjon Mahsadaliyev, charged in December 2007 with membership in Akromiya and complicity in the 2005 Andijon events; Abdumalik Ibragimov, sentenced in February 2007 on charges of membership in Akromiya to eight years' imprisonment; Abdusamat Karimov and Ilkhomjon Yuldoshev, sentenced in July 2006 to eight and five years' imprisonment respectively, or the other members of their group convicted and sentenced at the same time as a group on charges of Akromiya membership.

Unlike in previous reporting periods, there were no credible reports of arrests or harassment of Muslim believers based solely on outward expressions of their religious belief such as beards, veils, or mosque attendance, or of authorities citing religious extremism as a pretext for prosecuting those of moderate religious belief who were not members of banned organizations.

Jehovah's Witnesses came under particular scrutiny and occasionally faced arrest and imprisonment on charges of proselytizing. On July 23, 2008, authorities sentenced two Jehovah's Witnesses from Margilan, Abdubanob Ahmedov and Sergei Ivanov, to four years and three and one-half years' imprisonment respectively for allegedly teaching religion illegally. Courts also gave three-year suspended sentences to three other Margilan-based Jehovah's Witnesses--Raya Litvinenko, Svetlana Shevchenko, and Aziza Usmanova. In late 2008, an unnamed Jehovah's Witness from Khorezm province also was reportedly convicted on criminal charges of teaching religion illegally, but received a suspended sentence.

On July 8, 2008, a Navoi court fined Jehovah's Witnesses Guldara Artykova and Tursuna Yuldasheva for allegedly refusing to testify in court. On May 30, police in Navoi had come to Artykova's home and detained her and Yuldasheva after seizing religious literature. The women were brought to a police station, where officers beat Yuldasheva, reportedly causing numerous bruises and a concussion. Police released the women the following morning after authorities confiscated their passports.

There were no further developments in the March 2008 fining of Jehovah's Witnesses congregant Abdumannob Ahmedov for conducting a Bible study; the March 2008 sentencing of Mamur Tursunkulov and Nabi Kipchakov to five days' imprisonment and Arslan Suvankulov to three days' imprisonment for illegal religious activity; or the February 2008 fining of Jehovah's Witnesses congregants Elvira Safarova \$71 (93,150 soums) and Yevgeniy Kurbatov \$143 (186,300 soums) for violations of the administrative code related to the illegal teaching of religion.

There was no update in the case of Jehovah's Witness congregant Olim Turayev, who in April 2008 was sentenced in Samarkand to four years' imprisonment on criminal charges of illegally teaching religion and organizing an illegal religious organization.

Irfan Hamidov, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses Samarkand congregation who had been sentenced to two years in a labor camp in May 2007 on charges of illegally teaching religion, was released in May 2009 after

completing his sentence and expelled to Tajikistan, his country of citizenship.

Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, leader of a registered Full Gospel Pentecostal congregation, remained in a Navoi labor camp serving a four-year sentence for his 2007 convictions on charges of organizing an illegal religious group, inciting religious hatred, and distributing religious extremist literature. In previous reporting periods, the Government refused to extend amnesty to Shestakov on allegations that he had violated internal prison regulations.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. There were numerous reported instances of police raiding meetings of unregistered congregations and detaining their members. With a few exceptions, authorities charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum wage. In contrast to previous periods, several individuals were imprisoned for up to 15 days for such offenses during the reporting period.

On April 8, 2009, the Sergeli District Criminal Court sanctioned the police raid on the home of Pavel Nenno, a deacon of an officially registered Baptist church, in Tashkent and convicted him of violating the Code of Administrative Offences by illegally teaching religion at his home to children and gave him a 15-day prison sentence. Nenno maintained that he was feeding homeless children, not teaching them religion. Eight law enforcement officials raided his home in Tashkent's Sergeli district on March 27, 2009. The court also ordered materials seized from Nenno's home, including Christian books, magazines, posters, films, and a laptop computer, to be destroyed.

On April 3, 2009, a court in the town of Almalyk in Tashkent province found 13 Baptists guilty of proselytism and fined them each 50 times the monthly minimum wage (approximately \$1,000). On March 15, 2009, police from the "antiterrorism" department raided a private home in Almalyk where the Baptists were engaged in a worship service and seized religious literature in Russian and Uzbek. The police were accompanied by a Russian Orthodox priest, who reportedly warned the Baptists not to attend worship services of unregistered churches and urged them to attend his church instead.

On March 3, 2009, the Kurgantepe District Criminal Court in Andijon Province convicted three members of an unregistered Protestant church--Mahmudjon Turdiev, Mahmudjon Boynazarov, and Ravshanjon Bahramov--of illegally teaching religion and sentenced them to 15-day jail terms. Three other church members--Mahmudjon Dehkanbaev, Alisher Shorahmedov, and Murod Rahimov--were detained in a homeless shelter for lack of identification. Rahimov was released on March 6, and Dehkanbaev and Shorahmedov were released on March 13. All of the men had been detained after a March 1 police raid on a private residence.

On October 10, 2008, the Mirabad District Criminal Court in Tashkent convicted seven members of an unregistered Pentecostal church of holding an illegal religious meeting on October 4 and sentenced them to 15-day prison terms. Five other congregants were fined \$90 (125,200 soums). The court ordered the destruction of religious literature, including Bibles, seized from the Pentecostals. Church members had attempted unsuccessfully on several previous occasions to register.

There was no new information on any of the following cases from the previous reporting period: the June 2008 sentencing of four members of the unregistered Friendship Baptist Church to 10 days' administrative detention and fines of approximately \$32 (42,000 soums) each for organizing illegal religious meetings, violating the Religion Law, and teaching religion illegally; the May 2008 sentencing of members of Navoi's unregistered Baptist Church for holding illegal meetings; the May 2008 sentencing of members of Mubarak's unregistered Baptist church following a March 2008 raid on the church; the April 2008 sentencing of four Seventh-day Adventists from Guliston for holding

unregistered meetings in their homes; the \$287 fine (380,000 soums) levied on Baptist Eduard Kim in February 2008 for holding illegal religious meetings, following a raid on a Sunday worship service at his house; or two other reported cases of raids and brief detentions in September and October 2007.

There were no new updates for the following cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses: The March 2008 conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses congregant Abdumannob Ahmedov, who was fined \$280 (372,000 soums) for illegal distribution of religious materials and \$845 (1,117,800 soums) for illegal religious activity; the March 2008 sentencing of Mamur Tursunkulov and Nabi Kipchakov to five days' imprisonment and Arslan Suvankulov to three days' imprisonment for illegal religious activity in Jizzakh; the February 2008 fining of Elvira Safarova \$71 (93,150 soums) and Yevgeniy Kurbatov \$143 (186,300 soums) for several violations of the administrative code related to the illegal teaching of religion; the October 2007 fining of ten congregants \$719 (931,500 soums) for organizing and conducting illegal meetings in Kagan.

Dilafuz Arziyeva, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses Samarkand congregation convicted of illegally teaching religion in June 2007, completed her sentence of two years of corrective labor, after which her wages were no longer deducted and handed to the state.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reported disruptions of the Jehovah's Witnesses annual memorial services commemorating Jesus Christ's death. Jehovah's Witnesses reported making special accommodations during the memorial to reduce the likelihood of disruptions. Authorities granted a visa to a Jehovah's Witnesses representative from the United States to observe the services on April 9, 2009, but did not issue visas to other foreign Jehovah's Witnesses.

Members of other religious minority faiths, including Hare Krishnas, occasionally faced harassment. Forum 18 reported that on February 7, 2009, police raided a Hare Krishna gathering in Samarkand as devotees were about to celebrate a religious festival, the appearance day of Sri Nityananda. Police detained several of the devotees overnight before releasing them.

In contrast with previous years, there were no cases during the reporting period in which authorities deported members of religious minority groups from the country on the basis of their religious affiliation.

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

The Government took steps to reduce the likelihood of torture, including for those arrested on alleged religious extremist charges, by transferring authority to issue arrest warrants from prosecutors to the courts (habeas corpus), thereby subjecting law enforcement officials to judicial oversight. In December 2008, the Government also adopted a new law on defense attorneys that codifies defendants' right to remain silent, to call an attorney or relative after arrest, and to meet with their lawyer whenever they wish. However, the Government replaced voluntary bar associations with a government-controlled Chamber of Lawyers that defense attorneys are required to join.

In April 2009 national legislation was amended to allow the Human Rights Ombudsman unfettered access to prisons to monitor conditions. Authorities at pretrial detention facilities, where many abuses reportedly occur, are now required, upon a detainee's request, to arrange a meeting between a detainee and representatives from the Human

Rights Ombudsman Office. In 2008, authorities also allowed independent monitors from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for a six-month trial period to conduct prison visits, which had been suspended in December 2004. The trial period ended in September 2008, and the ICRC submitted a report with its conclusions and recommendations to the Government. Negotiations on the future of ICRC prison visits in Uzbekistan were ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

There were continued reports of prison conditions improving for those convicted of religious extremism, including reintegration of such individuals into the general inmate population at several prisons across the country. Authorities announced that 10,000 individuals were amnestied in 2008, reducing the prison population to 38,000, an incarceration rate of about 138 prisoners per 100,000 persons. Amnesties reduced prison overcrowding; however, it was unclear how religious prisoners benefited from these amnesties.

The Government also allowed greater religious expression by Muslims. On state-controlled television, there was a noticeable increase in the number of broadcasts on Islam during the reporting period, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. It was more common to see women on the street wearing the hijab than in the previous reporting period, and mosque attendance continued to increase. Former Mufti Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf continued to host a popular radio program on Islam, teach at the Islamic University, and publish widely on a variety of religious topics in both print and electronic formats.

In 2008 authorities agreed to register and allow construction of a new Orthodox church in Khorezm province. Authorities also re-registered the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which distributes humanitarian aid to those in need.

The Government continued to respect the military pacifism of Jehovah's Witnesses, as the draft board routinely gave exemptions. On April 9, 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country did not encounter any disruptions during their annual memorial services commemorating Jesus Christ's death.

At least one Protestant was granted amnesty during the reporting period.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Society was generally tolerant of religious diversity but not of proselytizing. In particular, Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society. However, some evangelical or Pentecostal Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts encountered difficulties stemming from discrimination. There were persistent reports that ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced discrimination and harassment. State-controlled media in some cases encouraged societal prejudice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with local religious leaders, human rights activists, and government officials to discuss specific issues of human rights and religious freedom. U.S. State Department officials in Washington, D.C., met on several occasions with embassy officials of the country to convey U.S. interest in expanding religious freedom. U.S. officials traveled to and around the country meeting with religious leaders and groups as well as with government officials. The Ambassador and embassy officials maintained regular contact with the CRA and with religious leaders, including imams, priests, and rabbis; they also regularly discussed religious freedom concerns with educators, journalists, and human rights activists. The Embassy emphasized the importance of religious freedom by including religious leaders in its official events.

When the Embassy learned of difficulties religious groups or faith-based foreign aid organizations faced, it

intervened on their behalf where possible, taking such actions as contacting government officials and attending trials. Embassy officials frequently discussed religious freedom cases with diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring cases and contacting government officials. In November 2008 the Embassy hosted a roundtable with colleagues from other foreign missions and representatives from evangelical Protestant denominations and the Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss issues affecting those communities.

U.S. diplomats monitored Jehovah's Witnesses' worship services in Tashkent on April 9, 2009, to help ensure the congregations' freedom to observe their annual Memorial of Jesus Christ's death.

U.S. officials urged the Government to allow more freedom of religious expression, more mosque registrations, and more amnesties of religious prisoners of conscience, consistently emphasizing that religious tolerance and political security are complementary goals. U.S. officials, both in Washington, D.C., and in Tashkent, pursued negotiations with the Government aimed at amending its laws on religion, including lowering 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.

In November 2006 the Secretary of State first designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On January 16, 2009, the Secretary renewed the CPC designation and designated a 180-day waiver to further the purposes of the Act, pursuant to section 407 of the Act, as the Presidential Action in response to the CPC designation while negotiations continued on measures to improve religious freedom.