



Uzbekistan



Samarkand, situated at a central position on the silk road between China and the West, is the second largest city in Uzbekistan

Keeping Christian books and Bibles in one's home in Uzbekistan can be extremely dangerous. On 6 August 2012 six plain-clothes officers broke into the flat of a disabled Christian woman, Natalya Pleshakova, and her mother, Valentina. They beat the women, turned the flat upside down and, when they found Christian literature, dragged the women to the police station.

Officially a secular state, Uzbekistan has long been recognised as one of the most repressive regimes in Central Asia with respect to religious freedom, with the number of incidents against Christians increasing in recent years and extremely harsh religion laws severely limiting Christian activities. Registration of churches is compulsory but very difficult. Not only are the requirements strenuous, but applications can also be turned down for spurious reasons, such as minor grammatical errors or accusations that congregation lists have been falsified.

Christian activity by unregistered churches is considered criminal. Christians accused of illegally storing, importing or distributing Christian materials can be fined 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary. Attending prayer or worship meetings, giving Bible instruction both to children and adults and training Christian leaders can result in fines of 200 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage for repeated violations.

Police surveillance and raids on Christian homes and prayer and worship meetings happen regularly. Threats and physical violence are common, and fines, arrest and detention can follow. Those suspected of unregistered Christian activity are targeted specifically, although registered Christian groups can be subjected to the same treatment. Christians are not allowed to share their faith with Muslims, and in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, where persecution is especially severe, it is even illegal to own a Bible.

The country has a strong Islamic heritage, as 80% of its population are Uzbek, a traditionally Sunni Muslim Turkic tribe, and 93% are nominally Muslim. Christianity in the area was almost entirely eradicated in 1300 AD under the Turkic military leader Tamerlane, who was renowned for his hatred of Christians and who is still celebrated as a hero in Uzbekistan. This legacy is very noticeable in the way Christian converts from Islam are often ostracised from their families and communities or threatened and beaten to force them to return to Islam. Churches with many Muslim-background believers frequently face harassment from the authorities as well as from local communities.

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