Seminar at the BWA Annual Gathering 2016 in Vancouver

The situation for Freedom of Religion or Belief in Caucasus and Central Asia

The Testimony of pastor Ibrahim in Tajikistan

When the Soviet Union collapsed chaos became a reality in many areas and new independent states occurred. The religious identities of the different peoples now became evident. Some extremist Islamic groups tried to profit this chaos and there were fighting between Islamic guerillas and other moderate forces. This was the case also in Tajikistan in Central Asia. This is the background to Ibrahim's story.

In 1996 a good friend of him became a Christian and wanted to convert Ibrahim. But Ibrahim was upset and tried instead to convert his friend back to Islam. But his friend repeatedly said "Jesus is Lord and Savior". After six month Ibrahim had a vision and he heard Jesus talking to him saying "I'm Jesus the Lord and Savior". Jesus talked with him for 40 minutes and showed him how his life was. Ibrahim asked a lot of questions from his Muslim faith and Jesus replied. Jesus said: "I'm the god of love - I died and rose from the dead for you and I will come back". Ibrahim received Jesus and became a fervent follower. He gave his testimony openly and they tried to kick him out of the village. Some people tried to kill him. At that time the country was in civil war between government troops and extreme Muslims wanting to make Tajikistan an Islamic State with Sharia laws. The Islamic rebels, Mohaheddin, came to the Church where Ibrahim were, and they were shouting and threatening them. They wanted to stop the worship and the Church, but the Christians continued to pray. One man came to Ibrahim and pointed the gun to his head, but Ibrahim told him that Jesus loves him and wanted him to receive him. Since Ibrahim didn't stop and the whole group continued to pray in the Church the man tried three times to push the trigger of the gun but it failed all three times. Then the man left. The Christians could feel how the Church was filled with the Holy Spirit and the believers were filled with joy. The same evening the Mohaheddin returned and threatened to kill all in the Church if they didn't stop within a week. Every day during that week they came and beat them. Some of the believers gave up. Every time they came and beat Ibrahim his praised the Lord and blessed them and told them that Jesus is the way for them. Thursday night the officer said: "Don't beat him he will only say that Jesus is the way". "I already felt I was ready to die" Ibrahim said. On Sunday eight men came with machine guns and knives. They said to the believers: "Welcome to your death". They arrested Ibrahim in his home. His wife heard them coming and wondered what was happening. Ibrahim said there are some friends here and I will go out with them but I will be back later. The men took Ibrahim to the garbage pit and they said. "You say that Jesus is your savior but now he will not be able to save you". The guy took his knife to the throat of Ibrahim and told him to deny Jesus. But Ibrahim said that he found the truth in Jesus. The man said to him to pray his last prayer. He prayed loud: "You are the creator of heaven and earth ... you are above all religion and you are the truth. Reveal yourselves for these my brothers, protect them and their families and bless their children so that the war will end and receive my soul, amen". They now said: "You're crazy! I'm about to kill you and you are blessing me and my children!" Then Ibrahim said: "Jesus wants you to become his". They then let Ibrahim go.

These events gave him trust in God and when he is now summoned by the KGB he is not afraid. Some time ago, 60 km from Dushanbe, the police stopped his car. They checked his paper and saw the Bible in his back seat. When the police man asked him what it was he said it was the Bible talking about the only way to get to know God. They then arrested him and gave him a big fine. He thanked them and continued to witness to them. They then brought him to the police station and more police officers questioned him and he continued to witness to them. Finally the Police chief questioned him. They made a phone call to Dushanbe and the head office said to release him directly so that they would not get into trouble. Ibrahim says that the KGB also needs to get to know Jesus. "If I'm arrested it is a chance to witness. They need to do their work to 100% and we need to do our work to 200%."

We asked him if we can share his testimony with brothers and sisters all over the world and he said yes.

Why Religious Liberty is not respected in Caucasus and Central Asia

Central Asia is composed of five countries east of the Caspian Sea – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan. Caucasus is situated between the Caspian Sea, to the east, the Black sea to the west and Iran to the south. Southern Caucasus is composed by Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan while the northern past is situated mainly in Russia.

In most parts of Caucasia and Central Asia Human Rights and Religious Freedom are violated. Both these areas belonged to the Soviet Union before. After the breakdown of Soviet Union the countries in these areas became independent. But the authoritarian rule continued and sometimes hardened in the new countries.

Some of the reasons for this are the following:

- They belonged before 1990 to the Soviet Union with a tradition of religious limitations and general oppression of people
- There is today a totalitarian rule in most of these countries
- Out of fear of opposition the State wants to control the life of groups and individuals
- The State supports a secular or moderate majority religion. Wholehearted religious followers are considered difficult to control and therefore a threat
- The national belonging is linked to the majority religion (Sunni Islam in Central Asia, Shia Islam in Azerbaijan, Orthodox Christianity in Georgia and Armenia). Other belongings are considered might be a threat to the regime
- Minority groups are oppressed, discriminated and met with suspicion. But since the Soviet time there are quite big groups of Russians still living in these areas. Those belonging to Russian speaking groups are tolerated to exercise their faith.

South Caucasus

Georgia and Armenia

In both countries the Orthodox Church is in majority. While the Orthodox Church in Georgia is considered by other Orthodox Churches as belonging to the Orthodox family the Armenian Apostolic Church is not. Armenia is proud to declare themselves as the first Christian country in the world. The dominating Churches in these countries had a monopoly in religious representation in the official society until recently. Evangelical Churches and other minority groups have from times to times been oppressed and discriminated by the authorities. The dominant Churches still have the monopoly in the chaplaincy in prisons and schools. The Muslims are much persecuted in Georgia.

The Baptists in Georgia under the leadership of Bishop Malkhaz has adapted a lot to the orthodox worship style. This opened up the relations to the Orthodox Church but this and other things have caused a split in the Baptist Union. In Armenia the Baptist Union has developed good relationships with the Orthodox Church and has become much more accepted by the authorities and in the society than before.

Azerbaijan

This is a rather rich country and a development in general is taking place. But most of the riches are concentrated to the ruling family and most of the development takes place in the cities. The country is ruled by the family Aliyev since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The rulers are afraid of any popular uprising against its' strict regime. Therefore they limit the possibilities for journalist to act freely and the Civil Society organizations are strictly controlled. Religious groups cannot meet without state registration and minority groups have problems to get these registrations. A number of Baptist pastors have been arrested under alleged accusations. In Azerbaijan the majority of the population belong to the Shia Muslim faith. Most people are just nominal believers were their faith is shallow and more cultural than religious. Still their identity as peoples is very much marked by being Muslims. For many being an Azeri is also being a Muslim. This causes problems for minorities. Most Russian speaking persons belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. They are often tolerated since they are considered as semi-foreigners. But whenever people from the majority become Christians or if they join a minority group they will get into trouble. Registration of religious groups and their places of worship is an obligation if they want to have any kind of religious activity. The majority population look with suspicion on these groups and this attitude is fostered by the authorities, even if the country has declared itself to be secular.

The conflict in and about the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is a religious identity conflict and a geopolitical conflict. Separatist in this area with an Armenian Orthodox religious identity took up arms in 1991 against the Government of Azerbaijan, with a predominant Muslim identity. Armenia supported the separatist and went to war with Azerbaijan. A cease fire in 1994, but no peace agreement, makes this one of the frozen conflicts in Europe. Since Armenia is a so called "Christian" country this causes animosity versus Christians. Being an Azerbaijani and converting to Christianity is therefore seen as treason by many. This explains many of the negative attitudes against Christians, especially against converts.

In Azerbaijan Baptist pastors have been arrested in prison or house arrest in 1999, 2007 and 2009. They were arrested on fabricated lies about violence, possession of illegal weapons etc. The children of the Christians are often discriminated by the majority population in schools and by officials. Employers often fire people who become Christians. Sunni Muslims also have problems and they are, as well as groups of devoted Shia Muslims, often accused of extremism and put under surveillance and a number of their leaders have from time to time been in prison. The Religious Freedom report organisation Forum 18 reported about 15 different violations of Religious Freedom in Azerbaijan in 2014, 22 violation reports in year 2015 and so far (2016-07-07) they have reported 6 times. Most of these violations are against Muslims and Jehovah Witnesses.

Central Asia

In Central Asia the situation is even worse in most countries. The News Desk for reporting violation of Religious Liberty, Forum 18, reported 6 violations in Turkmenistan in 2014 and 23 in Uzbekistan. In 2015 Forum 18 gave 3 reports of violations in Turkmenistan, 4 in Tajikistan and 9 in Uzbekistan. In 2016 there are so far 3 reports from Turkmenistan, 3 from Tajikistan and 7 from Uzbekistan. The other countries I have not notes the number of violations reported. Turkmenistan is perhaps the worst country but out of fear of retaliation they don't report. For example, In June 2014 the police

raided a Christian youth camp in Turkmenistan. The Children were cross examined and sent home and the leaders were fined. This event was officially reported to Forum 18. Another time the police raided a home were Christians had an ordinary party. The participants were cross examined and brought to the police station were the police forced them to deny their Christian faith and exhorted them to go back to Islam.

Tajikistan

Introduction

The country is situated in the south-eastern part of Central Asia bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan in the south, China in the east and Kirgizstan and Uzbekistan in the north and west. The country has 8.6 million inhabitants. The Capital is Dushanbe. 84% are Tajik, 14% are Uzbek, 0.8% are Kirgiz. Religion: 98% Muslims (Sunni-89%, Shia-2%, Other-6%), 2% Orthodoxs, Protestants, Zoroastrism, and Buddhists.

Tajikistan is the poorest of the Central Asian countries and one of the smallest. The economy and the mentality of the people and the regime are very much in favor of Russia. At least one million Tajiks live in Russia and emigration continuous to be at a high rate. 50% of the Economy in Tajikistan consists of money sent from persons outside the country to relatives in Tajikistan. People speak Tajik but more often Russian, even among the native born Tajiks. A big part of the country is covered by high mountains. There is a development going on and many buildings are about to be built.

Human Rights

The Human Rights situation is difficult and is getting worse due to the increased security level. This affects the religious groups. The Religion law already says that no religious group can meet without registration and in places not approved by the authorities. It is also forbidden for children to take part in worship and religious education. This is more strictly implemented now than before. The Muslims are more affected since the law against religious teaching of children was mainly aimed to hinder young Muslims to become radicalized. But Protestant pastors are often summoned to the police and intimidated. The Orthodox Church and the Ismaili Islam are not very much restricted.

The religious situation in general

According to the constitution the State is supposed to be secular. But Tajikistan is dominated by Sunni Islam. But as it is in the other Central Asian countries the regime in Tajikistan doesn't want to see devoted religious practices and it is forbidden to wear Hijab or Burka. Most people are secular or moderate Muslims. There is an Islamic minority group in Tajikistan called Ismaili Islam. Most of them live in the eastern part of the country in the mountains. The Russian Orthodox Church in Tajikistan is under the Metropolitan in Tashkent. It is a very small Church, perhaps the smallest of the Orthodox Churches in the region. There are less than 3000 Protestants. About 1000 of them are Baptists in different groups. The rest are more or less independent Charismatic or Pentecostal Churches. There is a number of Korean Presbyterian-Charismatic Churches. There is also an Adventist group and the Jehovah Witness.

The Ismaili Islamic Community

The Ismaili Islamic Community is related to the Shia Muslims. They have some millions of followers and have centers in six places – Dushanbe, London, Burnaby (Canada), Toronto (Canada), Lisbon, Dubai. In Tajikistan they have about 200 000 followers. Most of them live in the Palmyra region where there are many mountains. They believe in the succession of leaders from the prophet Ali and that the current leader, Aga Khan, is the 49th generation from Ali. He was born and grew up in Geneva and now he lives in France and is well educated and very rich. In Dushanbe they worship every day between 18:00 and 19:00 and both men and women worship in the same room but on different sides of the room. The four elements earth, sand, water and fire are important and this is

symbolized in different parts of the Mosque. According to our guide they have full freedom to practice their faith – but due to Tajik law the children are not allowed to take part in the worship before the age of 18. But they have children activities in separate rooms in the center.

The Russian Orthodox Church in Tajikistan

The Russian Orthodox Church in Tajikistan has 150 years of history. In 2011 the Russian Orthodox Church gave autonomy to the Churches in Central Asia. But they belong together under the Metropolitan in Tashkent in Uzbekistan. The people and the Church are poor with mostly elderly members and the Church is small. They have Churches in six different places. Most of these places cannot afford to pay their priest. It is permitted to baptize children and it is done 40 days after the birth of the child. But if the child is sick and about to die they can baptize it earlier, since it is the baptism that cleanses the child from the inherited sin. The Orthodox Church doesn't have problems with the authorities and they have the permission to open up more Churches, but there is too little money and too little people to do it.

The members in the Church are 90% Russians and the rest are Tajiks, Tartars, Jews and Koreans etc. The Church is not sponsored by the patriarchate of the Church but must find its' own resources. And it comes from different sources. Sometimes people gather money in Russia for campaigns. They have recently got a gift and promise of more gifts to organize an interreligious conference with the theme "Christianity and Islam". They had the first conference this year and it was a success. But apart from this and some conferences organized by the government they don't have much contact with the Muslims or other religious communities. In 2013 the President invited the religious communities to a conference.

During the civil war between 1992 and 1997 the Orthodox Church in Dushanbe was in the crossfire between the Islamists and the government. They had the worship while the bullets passed the roof of the Church.

According to leaders in the Church there is a negative development in the Muslim Community the last six months. There are extremists preaching in the mosques. The Muslim classmates now accuse the Christian children for "kafir" (being impure). This didn't happen before. The peaceful side of the Muslim faith is not understood and taught these days by the Muslims in Tajikistan, according to the Church leader. "The Muslims should have good schools teaching peace and Human Rights". The conflict between the Russians and the Tajiks has developed to a political and religious conflict. "We warn our people not to be provoked, and ask them to stay calm", he says.

The Pentecostal Church

The Church started in 1992 and grew a lot till 1995. At that time they didn't have any problems. But groups in some parts of the country were exposed to violent attacks by the Islamist rebels fighting the Government during the Civil war that ended in 1997.

The Baptists in Tajikistan

The Baptist Union has not a registration as a Union but some of its' local Churches has. The biggest is the First Baptist Church in Dushanbe. Many members have emigrated, which is the general pattern in the population as a whole. Most members are Tajiks but Russian is the predominant language, even among the Tajik population. The Church is called "House of prayer for all nations" – a name that all the Baptist Churches in the country use. They have about 420 members in Tajikistan.

A second Baptist Union is The Union of Evangelical Christians in Tajikistan. They have a registration as a Union and a number registered local Churches. They have about 500 members.

Uzbekistan

Country background

Uzbekistan is the second largest country in Central Asia. During the Soviet occupation religion was not allowed before 1943. The three religions accepted from 1943 were Islam, The Orthodox Church and Judaism. From that time The Islamic center in Tashkent - Uzbekistan became the Islamic center for the whole of Central Asia. Since its early days, Christianity has existed as a small minority in the country, and has never had any major influence on the development of Uzbekistan. Today, in accord with a recent report by the US state Department, 93 percent of the Uzbek population is nominally Muslim, the vast majority being Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. Islam practice in Uzbekistan is not monolithic, and many people adhere to a secularized form of Islam. Some Muslim minorities have been banned, and others are kept under close scrutiny by the government. Orthodox Christians make for four percent of the population and faces the challenge of the decline in the ethnic Russian population. Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Lutherans, Seventh-Day Adventists, non-denominational Evangelicals and Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews (many of which have immigrated either to Israel or to the US), Baha'is, Buddhists, Hare Krishna's and atheists make for the remaining three percent. According to Operation World, only 0.28 percent of the population is Protestant. There are slightly more than 5.000 Baptists in the country.

Uzbekistan's International obligations

The main problem is that Uzbekistan has not put into practice the commitments its representatives have signed as a member country of the United Nations, to comply with the declaration of Human Rights, and the CCPR. Both of these documents clearly express freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in article 18. Uzbekistan is also a member of the OSCE, having consequently signed very strong documents demanding full religious freedom for all. In order to give the appearance of compliance to the treaties and documents the country has signed Uzbek authorities give the local churches the possibility to register, whereas making the procedures for registration too complicated. For instance, the delegation learned that not everyone wants to have their names on the lists of members required by the Committee of Religious Affairs from the churches, fearing that those who have signed up as members risk being harassed. The Baptist World Alliance and the European Federation will continue to make efforts to maintain a dialogue with the State Committee and other relevant institutions in order to facilitate the registration process, but also to contribute to more religious freedom for all in the future.

The religious freedom situation

The religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan is complex. The project coordinator of the OSCE explained that the authorities of Uzbekistan will not adapt to the international standard concerning religious freedom since they consider these questions to be purely internal. Nevertheless, the Uzbek Government has signed the International Bill of Human Rights, which obliges it to respect the freedom of religion and belief of its own citizens. The UN Human Rights Council has demanded the Government of Uzbekistan to make some changes in its legislation in order to comply with its commitments to the International Convention of Cultural and Political Rights (CCPR). They also expressed concerns about the imprisonments of religious leaders. The OSCE project secretary says that the Government needs to limit the freedom of religious groups in order to minimize the risk of

riots and demonstrations which could destabilize the government. If they accepted "Freedom of Peaceful Assemblies", as they have officially done when they became members of the OSCE, this could easily change from peaceful to violent. This is the alleged reason for the restrictions, according to the project secretary.

The Baptist Church

They are not allowed to evangelize the majority population of the country – the Uzbeks. All pastors and local Churches are Russian speaking. Russian ethnics are a minority of no more than five percent of the Uzbek population, and Russian speaking is dramatically declining in the country. Actually there is a law against proselytism, so they are not allowed to spread their faith to anyone with the aim to recruit that person. In order to be legally working in the country the Union, as well as each local church, has to be registered. The Baptist Union is registered, and 20 local Churches as well. Another 30 churches affiliated with the Baptist Union are not registered. Many of them have felt discouraged even to try to get registration. A significant number of local Churches would like to register but cannot comply with the conditions required from them. They need to have at least the names of 100 members listed with, addresses and other contact information. Then they need to get licenses from the local authorities, the fire brigade and the health department. When all the paperwork is in order they can send the application to the State Committee on Religious Affairs, says Mr. Kadyrov, chief expert of that Committee. The local Baptist leader who also met with the Chief Executive informed afterwards that it is not that easy to get registration. Usually the government officials make unreasonable requests, turning it almost impossible for them to have all the required paperwork. And the believers hesitate to give their names since they will then be at high risk to be harassed by others and by the authorities.

A couple of years ago the church building of the registered Church of Navoi was demolished because the authorities wanted to build a road. The congregation is now trying to find means to build a new church. A couple of years ago a Sunday School teacher in the Third Baptist Church of Tashkent was arrested because he was teaching children and they kept him in the custody for 15 days. In April of 2011 the Second Baptist Church of Tashkent was raided by the police. The accusation was that they had built and were running a Bible School illegally and that they had Uzbek literature in the Church, and that they were printing and selling Christian books illegally. 53,000 books and brochures were confiscated along with computers and a printing machine. Four persons who protested received criminal and commercial charges. The pastor of the Church, one of the four people, claims that they did not print and sell books at all, only leaflets for the member.

The Pentecostal Church

The delegation had the opportunity to meet with the leader of the Pentecostal Church. They have 138 local Churches but only 21 registered. They experience difficulties and are from time to time harassed by the police and it is very difficult for them to receive registration. Many members do not want their names to be mentioned during the process of registration because of fear of reprisals.

The Russian Orthodox Church

The delegation met with the Metropolitan Vikentiy in the Orthodox center in Tashkent. Vikentiy has the responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan,

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. He said that he regularly will meet with the presidents of these republics and he is open for cooperation in the area of religious freedom.

The Bible Society

Between 2006 and 2011 they couldn't import any bibles whatsoever. But after being in contact with the State Committee of religious affairs the Uzbek government decided to release a container with Bibles and revoke the fees for having stored the container for five years. Apparently, there is no restriction for people to come to the Bible Society and buy Bibles, in Russian, Uzbek or any other language. Even churches or other ecclesiastical bodies can buy bibles and take them to their church members. But you can be questioned by the police if you have a Bible and must show the receipt from the Bible Society. The Director of the Bible Society said that the restrictions on teaching children and youth in religion is a results of the fear the government have that extremists within the Muslim Communities could use the camps for other purposes than religion, such as terrorist training.

Training of Religious Leaders in Europe and Central Asia

One Important part in promoting Religious Liberty and Interreligious Harmony is the training of religious leaders. The Uniting Church in Sweden organized training in Religion and Law for Christian lawyers and leaders from Caucasus and Central Asia in 2011 and in November 2014 the European Baptist Federation organized together with the Conference of European Churches training of Human Rights Defenders on Human Rights and Religious Freedom. The CEC organizes every summer training conferences in their "Summer School in Human Rights".

Delegation trips by the EBF and the BWA

The European Baptist Federation, together with the Baptist World Alliance, has done a number of delegation visits to different countries to promote Religious Liberty and Interreligious Harmony. In 2009 we visited Azerbaijan and met with Protestants, the Caucasus Muslim Board, the leaders of the Jewish Community and the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the State Committee for Religious Affairs, different Embassies and the office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In 2011 we visited Uzbekistan were the delegation met with Protestants, The Bible Society, The OSCE office and a State representative from the State Committee for Religious Affairs. Another visit to Azerbaijan was conducted in 2013. In the autumn of 2015 we visited Tajikistan.

The International Community

The International Community, through the United Nations and the different regional bodies, has an important part in solving conflicts in general, also Interreligious conflicts. The Baptist Worlds Alliance has a general observatory status within the UN and has representatives to follow up cases in Committees and Councils in New York, Geneva and Vienna and the right to organize side-events and send in NGO reports. BWA is a member in the Committee of NGOs (CoNGO). Altogether there are around 600 NGOs with observatory status at the UN, mostly in specific issues. But the BWA has a general observatory status.

One main objective for the UN and the regional bodies is to promote Human Rights and prevent and resolve conflicts. In this the BWA can have a role as a global organization.

The BWA has used the Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council to send reports on the situation in Pakistan, in Azerbaijan, in Eritrea and Tajikistan. The EBF used its' status in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to present a report on Azerbaijan in the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting some years ago.

Final reflection

The objective of the BWA work with Freedom and Justice including Religious Liberty is to help the people living in oppression, discrimination and in vulnerable situations. How can we do this in the best way with the limited resources and human capacity we have? When it comes to Religious Liberty I see three levels on which we can and should work:

- 1) The people under oppression and discrimination: Visit them and communicate with them and help them understand that they are not alone. We can also help them to be trained in knowing their rights and organize meeting points where they can share experiences with each other.
- 2) Advocacy on national level: During visits meet with national authorities and try to influence them to change oppression policies and to protect minorities from harassment from other groups. Make also contact with different embassies in the countries to give them information so that they can advocate better on a national level.
- 3) Advocacy on international level: Be in contact with the UN and the regional bodies like the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and similar organizations in the Americas and Asia. Here the BWA and the regional bodies of the BWA can write reports and follow up the situations in connection with the member bodies of the BWA. BWA has appointed representatives to the UN in New York, Geneva and Vienna. The Universal Periodic Review (UPR), taking place for every nation every year in the Human Rights Council, has been used by the BWA to present reports. Could BWA have a stronger role in follow up the implementation of the recommendations accepted by the countries during the UPR? There is much more to do and we need to pray and reflect on what to do and how it and with what resources. During the BWA Annual Gathering in Vancouver now in July a resolution was adopted on Nigeria. In this resolution we decided to send a number of demands to the UN.

The vice chair of the Religious Liberty Commission, Elijah Brown, is director for the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative with the same vision as the BWA Commission for Religious Liberty. The cooperation between the Wilberforce Initiative and the Commission is very hopeful and will give much more resources to the work that needs to be done.

Yours sincerely Christer Daelander