

Judge upholds fines against Baptists in Uzbekistan

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OSLO, Norway (ABP) — A judge in Uzbekistan refused Oct. 14 to overturn fines against five Baptists convicted of illegal worship, an international news service that specializes in religious freedom coverage reported Oct. 26.

Fines totaling roughly 10 times Uzbekistan's minimum monthly salary stemmed from what police termed an "anti-terror" raid on an unregistered congregation worshipping in a home Aug. 15 in Samarkand, the nation's second-largest city. Worshipers told Oslo-based Forum 18 that officers roughed up members of the congregation, a charge which police denied.

On Sept. 21 a judge in Samarkand Criminal Court found five Baptists guilty of violating the state's ban on teaching religious beliefs without permission of a registered religious organization. The church is part of the Baptist Council of Churches, which rejects state registration in all the former Soviet states where it operates.

Appealing the ruling Oct. 14, the Baptists argued they committed no offense by meeting "for joint prayer and worship of God" without state registration, as they did each Sunday. They referred articles in the Uzbek Constitution and religion law guaranteeing freedom of conscience.

The court rejected the appeal, ordering that religious literature confiscated during the raid be turned over to the state's Religious Affairs Committee.

