

# Uzbekistan: Life Amidst Death

*Polluted water, a dying land and environmental diseases are matched by a resurgent Islamic faith among the Uzbeks of Central Asia. See front cover photo of an Uzbek senior citizen.*

by Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse

It is large and dead—it is the Aral Sea in the homelands of the Uzbek people in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is a Republic of the former Soviet Union and has suffered irredeemable harm because of it.

The Soviet government economic planners chose Uzbekistan as the Republic to be the main producer of cotton for all of the USSR. This would have been fine if there had been enough water to implement this policy. Unfortunately, the people were forced to divert water that normally flowed into the Aral Sea—the fourth largest inland sea in the world. It has dropped from fourth largest to sixth and the last native fish species was killed by pesticides in 1983. In some places the original shoreline is 40 miles from the now dead and deadly waters.

Heavy winds blow the toxic residue of pesticides and slat off the desert-like bed into Uzbekistan—slowly but inevitably turning into a desert. Because of this and the lack of good water, Uzbeks suffer from high levels of cancer of the esophagus, liver disorders, respiratory diseases and eye problems. They also have one of the highest infant mortality rates in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

## Islam Is Flourishing

Despite severe economic and environmental conditions Uzbeks are flourishing in two areas. They have one of the highest birth rates in Asia—a normal family has up to seven children. Secondly, they are reconnecting with mainline Islamic countries and rediscovering their Muslim roots. The former Communist

government officially repressed Islamic practices and the learning of the Arabic language, but now both of these are making comebacks.

The Uzbeks were the third largest ethnic group in the former Soviet Union and the largest Muslim minority. Like the Uighurs, and other Turkic people groups, they converted to Islam many centuries ago and consider Islam an integral part of their individual and community identities.

## Patriarchal and Communal

Uzbeks homes are centered around the father. They tend to be large and clan-like, therefore the extended family is very important. Since two-thirds of Uzbeks live in towns of 2,500 people or less, this traditional pattern of the Uzbeks has not been lost even after 70 years of Communism.

They enjoy music, poetry and storytelling. They have maintained the trappings and ceremonies of Islam during the Communist occupation, and now many are discovering the larger Muslim family once again—Jordan sent 60,000 copies of the Koran and Saudi Arabia sent one million to Uzbekistan in 1990.

*“My body pains from anguish  
and desire,  
My hair turns red from blood of  
tears.  
Lips are sweet as sherbet,  
But without sweet answers to my  
quest I would die.”*

A lament by Nadira, a 19th century poetess and wife of a Khan, after the death of her husband.

## Christianity

Up against more than 12 centuries of Islam and centuries of Russian Orthodox crusading oppression, Christianity has not had a real chance among the Uzbeks. The best estimates indicate that there are only 30 Uzbek Christians and no viable Christian church or congregation is known among Uzbeks anywhere in the world. If the United States had so few Christians in proportion to its population, there would be only 350 Christians in the U.S.

The advance of Christianity among the Uzbeks will be accomplished only be creative, determined pioneering missionaries. It will take significant prayer and commitment by those who send these missionaries to see a beachhead established.

Some Uzbeks have been exposed to the gospel but have not responded. One Uzbeks young man came to the Lord in 1980 but was imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital for witnessing to others.

Although the New Testament is now available in their own language, it cannot be distributed.

The Uzbek name means “self-lord” or “one’s own prince.” This perception, coupled with their strong family ties, make it very difficult for outsiders to penetrate this proud and threatened people.

**Pray for the Uzbeks!**

•**Pray** for the *Russian Christians* who live among Uzbeks to have love, humility and vision to reach out to their Muslim neighbors.

•**Pray** for the *salvation* of thousands of Uzbek families and neighborhoods.

•**Pray** for *tentmakers and other foreign visitors*—for wisdom and patience in befriending and reaching the Uzbeks.

•**Pray** for the *Uzbeks in Afghanistan*. Also

pray for the salvation of the few thousand refugees in China, Pakistan, U.S., Australia and Germany.

•**Pray** that *radio programs and print material* could be produced by the few Uzbek believers.

•**Pray** for the birth of the Uzbek *church* —a growing dynamic fellowship of believers, who might serve the Lord free from persecution.

•**Pray** that the Uzbeks can see themselves as God sees them: *loved*, accepted and wanted by Him as their Father.

**Uzbek Facts**

**Religion:** Sunni Muslim.

**Population:** 16+ Million

*Uzbekistan*—15 million (85% of the newly established state; 68% Rural, 32% Urban)

*Afghanistan/Pakistan*—1 million  
*China, USA, Australia, West Germany*—several thousand.

**Products:** Cotton, fruit, vegetables, light industry, minerals, silk.

**Diet:** Melons, fruit, tea, bread, rice, beef and lamb.

**Recreation:** Traditional singing and dancing; hospitality, poetry, humorous story-telling.

**Health Care:** Poor water & sanitation, infectious intestinal diseases.

**Literacy:** High, but not in Arabic.

**Uzbekistan—Uzbek Homelands**

**Area:** 172,700 sq. miles, mostly flat sun-baked lowlands and high mountain ranges

**Population:** 23 million total, Uzbeks-15 million

**Fact:** Uzbekistan produces 1/3 of Soviet cotton.

For additional prayer materials on other unreached peoples write to:

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