

TO THE LAND OF *IMAM AL-BUKHARI* (R.A.)

Abulfadl Mohsin Ebrahim, Professor of Islamic Studies, School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban

In July 2005, the International Association of Bioethics, of which I am a member, notified me of the first ever National Bioethics Congress that was to be held in Tashkent from 15-16 September 2005. I thought that it would be intriguing to be in that part of the world where some of our great Muslim scholars hailed from, especially *Imam al-Bukhari* (r.a.). I wrote to the conveners of the Congress and sent them a resume of my paper entitled "Human Rights and the Rights of the Unborn." The response was positive and my paper was accepted. The next hurdle was to get the visa. I phoned the Russian Embassy in Pretoria and I was informed that Uzbekistan was formally part of the Soviet Union and since Uzbekistan was accorded independent status in 1991, the Russian Embassy could not assist me in securing the necessary visa. I downloaded the Uzbekistan Visa Application Form from the internet and filled it up, scanned my passport and passport size photo of myself and proof of my employment in South Africa and e-mailed these documents as attachments to the contact person for the Congress, namely, Dr Zamira Muhamedova, Ph.D., a philosopher, who holds the Chair of Tashkent Medical Academy and the Chair of Philosophy and Science Methodology at the National Uzbekistan University, requesting her to try to have the visa issued to me at Tashkent Airport. She worked around the clock to see to it that I receive the visa. I was elated to receive my visa via e-mail as an attachment a week before my scheduled departure. I chose to travel by British Airways from Durban to Tashkent via London so that I could visit my sisters who reside in Leicester and other relatives in London and other British counties. I had no problems at Heathrow Airport and was issued a six months' visa upon arrival. I spent 3 days in the UK before leaving for Uzbekistan.



It was a 10-hour flight from Heathrow to Tashkent with a 1-hour stopover in Yeneran, Armenia, for dropping off passengers and refueling. The congress was co-sponsored by USAID, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan.

I landed at Tashkent Airport on Thursday 15 September 2005 at 03:10 am and as descended from the aircraft I heard my name being called out by an Uzbeki lady who led me to a mini bus and while being driven to the V.I.P. lounge, she took my baggage tag from my air tickets. At the lounge, my visa was officially transferred into my passport. The lady disappeared and an Uzbeki man brought my baggage and I went through custom formalities and as I came out of the Customs, Dr Yuldashev Ulugbek stepped forward to greet me. He introduced himself, with much difficulty in English, as a transplant surgeon. As we headed towards his car, he pointed out to me that we had to go to the “mountain” which was 99 km away, the venue for the Congress. He went on telling me how beautiful the venue was since the Chorvoq Oromgohi Hotel was actually built in between mountains in the midst of an artificial lake. This is evident from the photos below.



Chorvoq Oromgohi Hotel

The roads were relatively good and we reached at our destination in good time before sunrise to be in a position to offer the *Salat al-Fajr*. I checked in the hotel and Dr Ulugbek informed me that I should be ready for breakfast at 7 am and that the Congress

would be officially opened at 9 am. In the dinning hall I met the delegates from all the former Soviet Union Federation, namely, Tajikistan, Kurdistan, etc. and two female delegates from Russia as well as the Deputy Mufti of Uzbekistan. The common language among all the delegates was Russian and thus obviously Russian was the official language at the Congress. The conveners made provisions for two translators, a male and a female, to simultaneously translate the proceedings into English for the benefit of the foreign participants.

The Chairperson of the Congress was Professor Malika S. Abdullahodzaeva, Head of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Welcoming remarks were made by Professor F.G. Nazirov, the Minister of Health, Dr Benjamin Mills, Health Adviser USAID in Uzbekistan, Dr Umid M. Sharapov, a member of the CDC, the Deputy *Mufti* of Uzbekistan, *Shaykh* Yusupov Abdurazzok-hodgi who substituted the Grand *Mufti* Bahramov Abdurashid cori, Chairman of the Board of Uzbekistan Muslims, and finally by the participants from the various independent Republics and from Russia. Since all the other international participants, for example, from Singapore and the Philippines, did not arrive due to problems in obtaining visas, I ended off being the only international participant. During my brief address, I expressed my gratitude for being invited to present a paper at the Congress and told them that I brought with me to them warm greetings from the people of South Africa.



Scenery from the Congress venue overlooking the lake

The papers delivered at the two-day conference touched on various aspects of Bioethics including HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is becoming a problem in Uzbekistan and the main avenue for its spread, we were told, is predominantly through the use of infected syringes by the drug addicts.

Interestingly, at least three of the participants touched upon the Islamic perspective on Bioethics. Dr Zamira Muhamedova's paper was entitled "Islamic Bioethics: A Historical Perspective and Dr A.I. Kasymov spoke on "Sources of Bioethics in *Adab al-Tabib and in Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine.*" In my paper, which was simultaneously translated into Russian, I argued that two basic human rights, namely right to life and right not to be mutilated, should equally be extended to the unborn and substantiated my stance on the basis of the *Qur'an*, *Ahadith* and legal verdicts from the Schools of Islamic Jurisprudence.



Delivering my paper

On the very first day of the Congress, I befriended the Deputy *Mufti* with whom I could converse in Arabic and told him that I would like to perform *Salat al-Jumu`ah* the

following day. He reassured me that he would take me along to a *Masjid* in G'azlakent, a small town about 25 minutes away from the Congress venue.



Second on the left is Dr Yuldashev Ulugbek and next to him is the Deputy *Mufti* of Uzbekistan, *Shaykh* Yusupov Abdurazzok-hodgi



Third from the right is Dr Zamira Muhamedova, Professor Malika S. Abdullahodzhaeva and next to her is Dr `Abd al-Fattah `Abd al-Salam

The Congress resumed on Friday morning and more papers were delivered. Out of consideration for the *Jumu`ah Salah*, the Congress was adjourned at 11:30 am. At the *Masjid* in G'azalkent, we met its elderly *Imam*. Out of respect for the Deputy Mufti, he requested the Deputy *Mufti* to deliver the pre-*Khutbah* talk in Uzbeki, the *Khutbat al-Jumu`ah* in Arabic and to lead the *Salat al-Jumu`ah*. About 50 people mostly the elderly and middle aged and few youth participated in the the *Jumu`ah Salah*. After the *sunnah* and *nafl salah*, the *Imam* read a portion from the *Holy Qur'an* and thereafter the Deputy *Mufti* made the *du`a* in both Uzbeki and Arabic. It is perhaps apt to mention here that the Uzbekis belong to the Hanafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence.

During lunch, after returning from *Salat al-Jumu`ah*, the Deputy *Mufti* informed me that the original *Qur'an* which was handwritten by Zayb Ibn Thabit (r.a.) as sanctioned by the third *Khalifah*, *Sayyiduna`Uthman Ibn`Affan* (r.a.), 20 years after the demise of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.), was to be found in the city of Tashkent in *Tilli-Shaykh Masjid/Library*. This *Masjid* is also the office of the Grand *Mufti* of Uzbekistan and his Deputy. A visit to this small library is enough of a justification to visit Uzbekistan. This is not just another library, but a *Qur'an* manuscript library, with manuscripts as old as fourteen centuries from all over the Muslim world. Unfortunately for me, this Library remains closed during the weekends and thus I could not visit it.

The Congress's final session resumed at 14h00 and the final papers in the programme were delivered and certificates were awarded to the participants. During that time, I was interviewed by Uzbeki T.V. and had to answer questions pertaining to the standard of the Congress, the topic of my paper and my general impression of Uzbekistan.

On Saturday 17 September 2005, it was time to bid farewell to the many friends that we made over the two days from all over the former states of the then Soviet Union. Most of the participants had to wait for the luxury bus to transport them to Tashkent and thereafter took other forms of transport to their respective destinations. I was fortunate in that Dr Ulugbek drove me to Tashkent and dropped me off at the Grand Mir Hotel. My stay at the hotel was sponsored by USAID. I checked in at 10:30 am.

My wish to visit the *maqbarah* of *Imam al-Bukhari* (r.a.) in Samarqand was made possible by the fact that during the Congress, Dr Zamira Muhamedova had arranged with Dr `Abd al-Salam `Abd al-Fattah, a neonatologist, who resides in Samarqand to take me there. At 11:30 a.m. Dr `Abd al-Salam `Abd al-Fattah arrived at the Grand Mir Hotel and we took a taxi to the place where other taxis were stationed and at that venue, Dr `Abd al-Fattah `Abd al-Salam had to do some hard bargaining with a number of taxi drivers on the fare to Samarqand and tried to negotiate with them that our destination had to be the *maqbarah* of *Imam al-Bukhari* (r.a.). Finally, one taxi driver agreed to take us straight to the *maqbarah* of *Imam al-Bukhari* (r.a.) and the price was right and off we went. The roads were quite good, with very few potholes, and all along the roads there were vendors selling mostly melons and watermelons. After two hours of driving we stopped on the side of the road to relish the melon. It was really sweet and tasty and snow-white in colour. I even got to taste the dried melon for the first time and was told that dried melon is exported only to Russia. All along the route to Samarqand, the taxi driver kept on

conversing to me in English, informing me that during the time when Uzbekistan was one of the states under the Soviet Union, he was enlisted in the army and sent to Syria as a bodyguard to the Russian Ambassador. Apparently, it was there that he learnt English. As we drove past, the taxi driver explained to me that the cotton and fruit farms were situated along the motorway so that the farmers could easily have their crops transported to the desired destinations. We finally reached the outskirts of Samarqand at around 17h30.



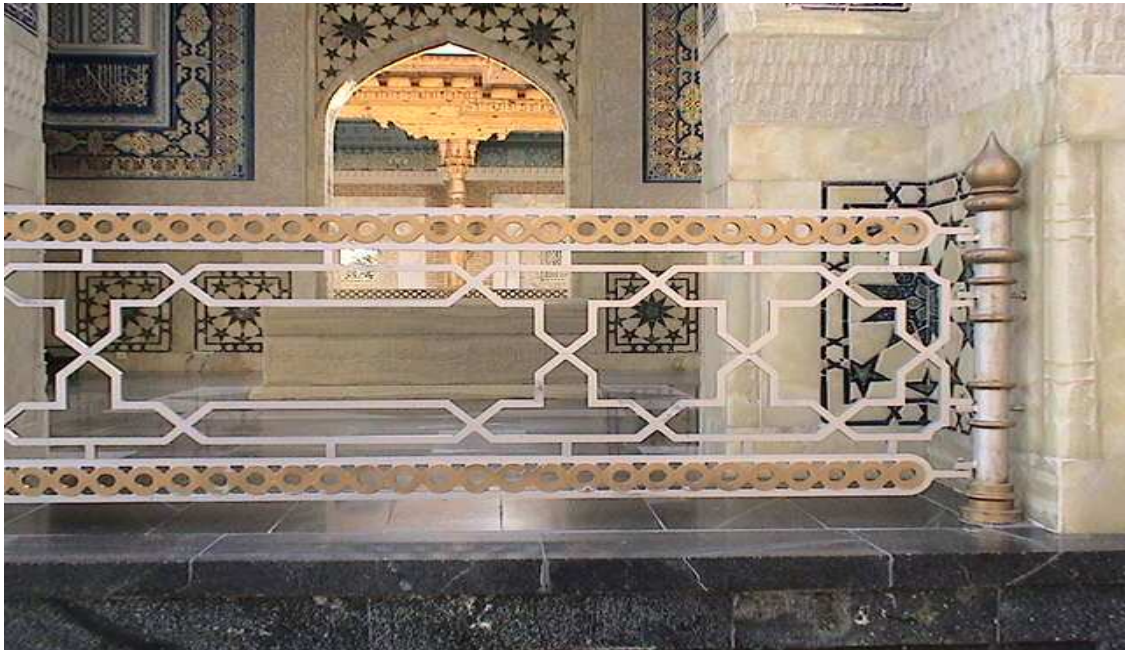
Melons and water melons on the roadside

The site where *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) is buried is truly impressive. One enters through a huge gate and it is there that one has to pay an entrance fee that includes a guided tour. There is also a small shop selling some souvenirs and local crafts. Then one immediately steps into a courtyard laden with lavish lawns, tall trees and colourful flowers and on the left is the ablution area and *Masjid*.



***Imam* al-Bukhari Complex in Samarqand**

The *maqbarah* of *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) lies straight ahead. Inside the mausoleum of *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) there is a marble tomb, but the real burial site of *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) is actually below that tomb.



The marble tomb



The real burial site of *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.)

The door to his *maqbarah* is under lock and key (as can be seen in the above photo) and I was told by the guide who conversed to me in Arabic that that door is opened only on the two `Ids when thousands of people visit it to pay their respects to this great *muhaddith* (r.a.), whose *Hadith* compilation, i.e. *Al-Jami` al-Sahih* is considered to be the most authentic of the *Sihah Sittah* (i.e. The Six Authentic Compilations of *Hadith*). Standing at that door, I thanked *Allah* (SWT) for making it possible for me to visit the site where this great savant of Islam laid buried and I read *al-Fatihah*. It was truly an immense emotional experience for me for it never crossed my mind when I was studying Islam in Pakistan and Cairo and eventually when I taught *Hadith* to the students who enrolled for Islamic Studies at the then University of Durban-Westville in the 1980s and early 1990s that one day I would be able to visit the *maqbarah* noble son of Islam.

Here, it may be apt to share with our readers that *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) who was born in Bukhara in 194 *Hijri* was not immune from the envy of the people. Once, a man approached him and asked him whether the *Qur'an* was created (*makhluq*) or not created (*ghayr makhluq*). *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) paused for a while. The man insisted on getting a reply, so *Imam* al-Bukhari told him: "The *Qur'an* are the words of *Allah* and they are not created (*ghayr makhluq*)." The people then posed more questions to him about the words of the *Qur'an*, upon which *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) said, "Our actions are created and the pronunciation is one our actions." After this, mass propaganda was stirred up against *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.), which led to accusations that he believed the words of the *Qur'an* to be created and never stopped troubling him. They met the *Amir* (Governor) of Bukhara, Khalid ibn Ahmad. They told him to call request *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) to come to his residence to teach *Hadith* to his son. *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) gave the following reply: "I do not want to abuse knowledge and carry it to the footstep of the rulers. If anybody wants to learn, they should join my school." The *Amir* then said: "If my son was to attend your school, he should not sit with ordinary people. You would have to teach him separately." *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) answered: "I cannot stop any person from hearing *Ahadith*." That infuriated the governor of Bukhara and got a *fatwa* (verdict) from the misguided `Ulama' against *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) and *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) left the city of his birth en route for Samarqand. According to the guide who was taking me around the *maqbarah* of *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.), the *Amir* of Bukhara immediately dispatched an emissary to the *Amir* of Samarqand to close the gate of Samarqand and not to allow *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) to enter. Upon reaching Khartang, a small village at the outskirts of Samarqand, *Imam* al-Bukhari (r.a.) settled down there for barely a month, where he taught *Hadith* for a while and fell ill during the holy month of *Ramadan* and returned to His Creator on the night of `Id *al-Fitr*, the first night of *Shawwal* in the 256 *Hijri* at the age of 62. He was thus buried on the morning of `Id *al-Fitr*. May *Allah* (SWT) amply reward his blessed soul, *amin*. The legend, according to the the guide is that *Imam* al-Bukhari had requested to be buried next to Qussam Ibn `Abbas (r.a.), the cousin of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.), but that his request was not fulfilled since he was not allowed to enter into Samarqand.

Dr `Abd al-Fattah `Abd al-Salam then took me to his home in Samarqand where his wife prepared some delicious Bukhara Pilav (a mixture of rice and meat) which I thoroughly relished. It was served with tomato and onion salad. Fresh tomato juice was served as starters.

His wife and daughter then accompanied *us to the site where Sayyiduna Qussam Ibn `Abbas (r.a.) is buried.*



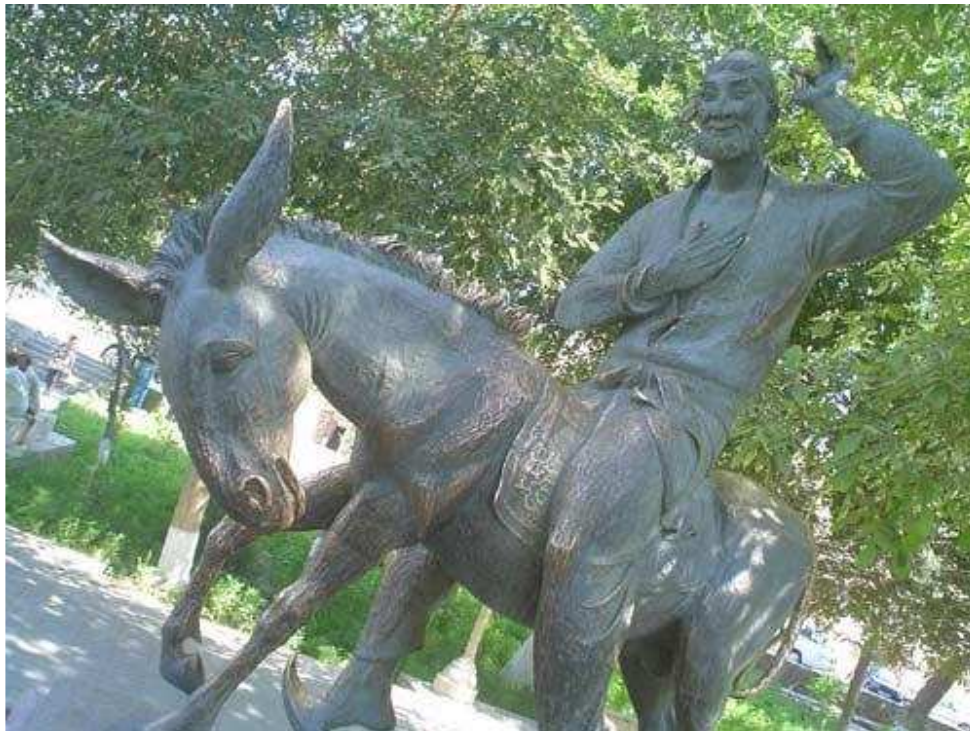
Entrance to the grave of Sayyiduna Qussam Ibn `Abbas (r.a.)

In fact there is a *Masjid* in that complex which is named after him. Within that complex too are the tombs of the Timur Sultans and their families.

I was then driven to a place where I took a taxi to Tashkent. There were in all 5 of us in the taxi, including the driver, and it was miserable to be sitting in between two people in the back seat for the rest of the 3 and half hours ride. Fortunately, the taxi driver would stop every hour and I could come out and stretch my legs. I was dropped off at the Grand Mir Hotel just before midnight. Upon arrival, the receptionist told me that Dr Zamira Muhamedova had phoned to enquire about my safe return from Samarqand and that I would be joining her and her husband for lunch the following day, i.e. Sunday 18 September 2005.

Dr Zamira Muhamedova and her husband, Dr Azamat Muhamedov, Vice Regional Director of the Institute of Asian Culture and Development, arrived promptly at the hotel at 11 a.m. They both presented me with souvenirs of Uzbekistan. They then informed me that they would be taking me on a city tour before having a typical Uzbeki dish for lunch. They went out of their way to get a young interpreter, Hasan, to accompany us.. The new section of Tashkent has many new buildings. The Senate and Parliament buildings are truly impressive. The people in that part of the city are dressed in European clothing while in the old part of the city, which is minutes away, are dressed in traditional clothing, more like the Egyptian villagers' way of dressing and the women had their heads fully covered. Here it may be important to mention that the Uzbekis are very friendly, courteous and obliging. They have European features except that their eyes are like that of the Chinese, but are much bigger in size.

As we drove along, I noticed that Daewoo cars were the most popular. They are found in all shapes and sizes and are totally different from the ones that are found in South Africa. My hosts took the trouble to stop as we drove along to visit the *Masajid* and other historical sites. While walking at one the sites, Mr Azamat Muhamedov asked me “Do you know *Hodja* Nasruddin?” “No”, I promptly replied. On second thoughts, I asked him if he meant *Mullah* Nasruddin. “Yes,” he replied and added, “We call him *Hodja* Nasruddin. I learnt later on that the Arabs call him *Joha*, the Turks know him as *Hodja* Nasruddin, and the Indians, Pakistanis and Iranians know him as *Mulla* Nasruddin. Mr Azamat Muhamedov then informed me that there was a statue of *Hodja* Nasruddin on his donkey in the city of Tashkent and decided to take me to see it. *Hodja* Nasruddin was a 13th century *Sufi*, very witty and renowned for his great sense of humour. However, when we arrived at the spot where the statue was supposed to be, it had disappeared. So he enquired from the people that were around that place as to what happened to the statue. He was told that someone had cut off the tail of the donkey so the whole statue had been taken away to repair its tail. This made me recall an incident when one day the townspeople came running to *Hodja* Nasruddin to inform him that the donkey he loved so much was lost. *Hodja* Nasruddin exclaimed: “Praised be to *Allah*! For if I was on it, I too would have been lost!” This is exactly what happened when we went looking for the statue of *Hodja* Nasruddin on his donkey - both of them were nowhere to be found!



Statue of Hodja Nasruddin

My hosts then took me to a restaurant where I was treated with a traditional dish called Lagman, which is a kind of soup with meat, and flour in the shape of noodles. This

delicacy is eaten with thick crusty round bread. I must mention here that all meals in Uzbekistan is served with a pot of black tea which is poured in small bowls and one goes on sipping the tea while relishing one's meal.



Mr Azamat Muhamedov, his wife, Dr Zamira Muhamdova, and Hasan, the interpreter, at the restaurant

After meals, we returned to the hotel where it was time to bid farewell to my hosts and I thanked them for their hospitality and told them that one day *insha' Allah* we would meet again in South Africa.

Since that Sunday was my last day in Tashkent, Professor Malika Abdullahodzhaeva sent a driver to the hotel requesting that I visit her at her home. Her husband who was also a doctor passed away some 6 years ago. On that particular day, it was her grandson's 21st birthday and I was very warmly received by his son-in-law, daughter, grandchildren and their friends. It was just a get together of her grandson and friends with no birthday cake served. Meals were served almost immediately upon my arrival and among the spread on the table was Bukhara Pilav, my favourite dish!

After meals, Professor Malika Abdullahodzhaeva showed me the two-volume Pathology textbook in Russian which she had authored and told me that she was busy with its revised edition. I was quite amazed to learn that there were 80 000 medical doctors in Uzbekistan and that most of them had been had been trained in Uzbekistan! Professor Malika Abdullahodzhaeva then reassured me that Dr Yuldashev Ulugbek would promptly be at the hotel at 1 a.m. the following morning to take me to the airport and asked her daughter, daughter, who is also a doctor, to drop me off at the hotel. I then had a nap and

half an hour past midnight, I went down to the lobby with my luggage. Dr Yuldashev Ulugbek arrived on time and I must really commend the Uzbekis for respecting time. The airport was only 15 minutes away from the hotel. After he got permission for me to enter the airport area where only travelers are allowed in to check in and have their bags weighed, I bid him farewell and thanked him for his kind gesture in receiving upon my arrival in Tashkent and for seeing me off. My flight was scheduled to depart at 3:45 a.m. It was only at 2:30 a.m. that a representative of the British Airways came to inform us that there would be a long delay since the flight from London had not arrived and we told us to return to the hotel. I explained to her that I had to fly to London since I had to connect the same day for the flight to South Africa. She was accommodating and endorsed my tickets to Uzbekistan Airways via Frankfurt and from there via British Airways to London and arrived in London well in time to be in a position to catch my connecting flight to South Africa on 19 September 2005.

I must confess that a Muslim visitor to Uzbekistan may find that most of the Muslims in that part of the world are not necessarily upholding the tenets of Islam, but I would like to draw the attention of the readers that we have to bear in mind that, under the rule of the Soviet Union, it was forbidden for Muslims to openly practice their faith. It may be apt to mention here that on the occasion of the independence of Uzbekistan, the people of Makkah built the largest *Masjid* in Tashkent. Hasan, the interpreter told me that on *Id al-Fitr* and *Id al-Adha*, the congregation at that particular *Masjid* is so huge that the people have to pray outside the *Masjid* onto the street. Moreover, in only 14 years after independence, the Uzbekis have established an Islamic University in Tashkent and Muslims from the Arab world have generously built a number of Islamic educational institutes in some Uzbeki cities. I am, therefore, hopeful that within a decade or so, by the grace of *Allah* (SWT), Islam will be vibrant in that part of the world. This hope stems from the fact that when I asked the taxi driver who took me to Samarkand whether he was a Muslim, he instantaneously replied: “*Al hamdu li Allah!*” (Praise be to *Allah*).