



This article was published by F18News on: 1 February 2010

TURKMENISTAN: Worship without state registration "illegal"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Turkmenistan continues to raid Protestants meeting for worship in different parts of the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. One such raid was led by Turkmenistan's former Chief Mufti, Rovshen Allaberdiyev, who is now imam of Dashoguz Region as well as being the senior regional Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs official. Allaberdiyev and accompanying officials confiscated Christian books during the raid, including personal Bibles. All 22 people present were taken to a local government building, questioned and pressured to sign statements not to attend the church in future. "Some people signed and now some are afraid to come to services, especially new people," one church member told Forum 18. "We were told it is illegal to meet without state registration. But we told them we have already applied for registration and are waiting for a response." In a separate raid in another region, police accused a pastor of violating the Religion Law by praying at a birthday party.

Members of Protestant churches in different parts of Turkmenistan continue to face raids and threats for meeting for worship, local Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. Officials have stated that meeting for worship without state registration is "illegal". No official has been prepared to explain to Forum 18 why these congregations have been harassed.

Two of the harassed congregations - Path of Faith Baptist church in the northern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] and Peace to the World Pentecostal church in the south-eastern town of Mary - are among religious communities which have been seeking legal status in vain for many years. The pastor of one of the congregations is among many Turkmen citizens on the country's exit blacklist (see F18News 2 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403>).

The harassment, denial of legal status, exit bans on prominent religious believers, continuing confiscation and censorship of religious literature, and continuing imprisonment of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors come as Turkmenistan blandly assures the United Nations Human Rights Committee that citizens and other residents of the country enjoy freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom of movement (see F18News 3 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1404> and 12 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1408>).

Despite repeated attempts, Forum 18 was unable to reach Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] between 28 January and 1 February. His colleague told Forum 18 on 28 January that Gurbanov was away on a work trip to Lebap Region and would not be back for seven days. He said he was "not competent" to answer Forum 18's questions. The Gengeshi is a key instrument in Turkmenistan's suppression of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 13 October 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361>).

Right to worship without state registration denied

Turkmenistan's former Chief Mufti, Rovshen Allaberdiyev, who is now imam of Dashoguz Region as well as being the senior regional Gengeshi official, raided the Sunday worship service of the Path of Faith Baptist congregation on 20 December 2009, church members complained to Forum 18 on 25 January 2010. Allaberdiyev was accompanied by a police officer and three other officials who did not identify themselves. One of them had a camera and took photos of those present.

Officials have claimed that such raids are their "duty" (see F18News 18 April 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1116>). Allaberdiyev was in September 2009 moved to his latest Gengeshi and state-controlled Muslim religious community post by President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov (see F18News 13 October 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361>).

Allaberdiyev and his accompanying officials confiscated some 100 Christian books during the latest raid, including personal Bibles. Turkmenistan imposes strict censorship of religious literature (see F18News 12 May 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294>).

The officials took all 22 people present to the local hyakimlik (administration) building in December 2009, where they were questioned and pressured to sign statements not to attend the church in future. "Some people signed and now some are afraid to

come to services, especially new people," one church member lamented to Forum 18. "We were told it is illegal to meet without state registration. But we told them we have already applied for registration and are waiting for a response from Ashgabat."

Church members met Allaberdiiev and other officials in meetings at the hyakimlik in January 2010, to try to overcome the problems and regain the confiscated literature. In response to church members' pleas to at least hand back personal Bibles, two were returned.

However church members failed to convince officials that they should have the right to worship undisturbed - as is their right under the international human rights commitments Turkmenistan has signed - even after reminding officials that the Baptist church's registration application is being considered. "We're not underground," one church member told Forum 18, "we work openly."

Praying at birthday party illegal

The Pastor of another Protestant congregation in Dashoguz, Yuri Rozmetov of Light of the East church, and his mother were interrogated by police on 28 January. The interrogations happened after police raided a birthday party that evening in Gurbansoltan-eje District, 30 kms (20 miles) west of Dashoguz.

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that police officers arrived together with the District Gengeshi official and entered the home without the owners' permission. Without giving their names or showing any warrant, they began questioning all those present "using psychological pressure". Pastor Rozmetov and his mother were taken to the local police station and questioned from 9 pm until 1 am the following morning.

Police accused the pastor of violating the Religion Law by praying at the birthday party, despite the fact that he had done so at the family's request. Police claimed that he needed extra permission to conduct any religious work in the District and ignored his insistence that the church's registration allows him to conduct religious activity throughout Dashoguz Region. Officials have made similar claims for a number of years (see eg. F18News 18 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=632>).

On 29 January, the day of his release, Pastor Rozmetov wrote to the Gengeshi office of the Regional Hyakimlik asking why the police and the District Gengeshi official had raided the birthday party, and questioned all those present.

Despite repeated attempts, Forum 18 was unable to reach Gengeshi official and imam Allaberdiiev at his office at the Dashoguz Regional Hyakimlik between 28 January and 1 February. His colleague Tekesh Kakajanov told Forum 18 that Allaberdiiev was not in the office and refused to answer Forum 18's questions as to why the two congregations are being harassed.

Interrogations of other Protestants continue

Forum 18 has also learnt that a Protestant church in another town faced pressure from the local imam (and state Gengeshi official) in late December 2009 about the same time as the Path of Faith congregation in Dashoguz. The church was accused of conducting illegal activity even though this was included in their state-registered statute. However, church members hope to resolve the problems directly with officials.

In another incident, in the town of Mary members of the Peace to the World Pentecostal church - which has applied in vain for legal status - continue to be summoned for interrogation to the local Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. "The most recent time was four days ago, when a female church member was taken from her work at 10 am and pressured to write a statement about why she attends the church," Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev told Forum 18 from Mary on 25 January. "She wasn't freed until 7 o'clock that evening."

However, Pastor Nurliev notes that fines are no longer being levied on church members to punish them for religious activity. "I was fined 1,500,000 Manats back in autumn 2008 for what they called illegal religious activity - that was the last time." He said he had paid the fine (then worth 1,990 Norwegian Kroner, 220 Euros or 288 US Dollars).

The man who answered the phone at the Mary Regional Gengeshi office on 1 February put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728>.

For a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>>.

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