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TURKMENISTAN: Did government order Orthodox diocese to split?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The Deputy Chair of Turkmenistan's Committee for Religious Affairs has refused to say whether the government pressured the Orthodox Church to split the Church's Central Asian Diocese by putting its Turkmen Deanery under the Patriarch. "I'm not authorised to respond to you," Nurmukhamed Gurbanov told Forum 18 News Service when asked about the split. However, Gurbanov was willing to discuss other matters, claiming for example that Orthodox parishes in the country face no restrictions. Fr Georgi Ryabykh of the Moscow Patriarchate told Forum 18 that they hope the decision will make pastoral oversight easier. "For years the bishop in Tashkent didn't visit this part of the Diocese, and that isn't normal church life." Deceased President Niyazov had asked for the split in 2005, sparking complaints from another priest that Niyazov was trying to build an independent Orthodox Church just as he had done with Islam. Fr Ryabykh, however, said that "It couldn't just be a response or reaction to a demand by a president, as if the president demands and the Church obeys." He added that "some time was necessary to understand the situation and make a decision."

Russian Orthodox leaders have admitted to Forum 18 News Service that the decision to split their deanery in Turkmenistan away from the Central Asian Diocese in the Uzbek capital Tashkent and place it under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch ultimately followed the call by the late Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov. But Fr Georgi Ryabykh, assistant to Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, who heads the Department for External Church Relations at the Moscow Patriarchate, told Forum 18 that they hope the decision will make it easier to have pastoral oversight over the isolated deanery. "For years the bishop in Tashkent didn't visit this part of the diocese, and that isn't normal church life," he told Forum 18 in Moscow on 16 October.

The decision was taken by the Church's Holy Synod in Moscow on 12 October. Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the Turkmen government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, told Forum 18 on 16 October that he had not heard about the Holy Synod's decision. Asked whether the government had pressured the Orthodox Church to make the move, he responded: "I'm not authorised to respond to you."

But Gurbanov brushed aside any suggestion that the Orthodox parishes – like other religious communities in Turkmenistan – face restrictions. "They live very well here, both in Soviet times and now," he maintained. "In all places churches function and have registration. They perform rites normally." He denied that the Diocese in Tashkent has faced any problems maintaining contact with the deanery in Turkmenistan. Asked about the difficulties the Church faces importing literature and religious objects, Gurbanov denied any problems. Asked about the difficulties the parish has in the northern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in completing its half-built church, Gurbanov said he was not informed and would find out.

Reached on 16 October, Shirin Akhmedova, head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 explained who was calling.

Until the 12 October Holy Synod decision, the Central Asian Diocese covered Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. It is led from Tashkent by the 67-year-old Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim). The Turkmenistan deanery has 12 parishes across the country, as well as a convent in the Turkmen capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. Metropolitan Vladimir last visited parishes in Turkmenistan for one week in 2003.

A priest of the deanery told Forum 18 from Turkmenistan on 18 October that contacts with the diocesan headquarters are minimal. "It was four and a half years ago that Metropolitan Vladimir was last here," the priest lamented. "I know he was in an accident and wasn't well for a while, but he has been due to come here. No-one else came from Tashkent in that time either." The priest noted though that two students from Turkmenistan are currently studying at the Orthodox seminary in Tashkent, while four young women are studying to become choir leaders in the Ukrainian city of Odessa. "They are all due to return when they have completed their studies."

The priest declined to speculate on why the Holy Synod decided to split the deanery away from the Central Asian diocese or whether this would enable greater contact with the rest of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The late President Niyazov proposed the transfer of the deanery away from the jurisdiction of the Central Asian Diocese in a letter to Patriarch Aleksii in May 2005. In his July 2005 response, Aleksii politely sidelined the proposal. While claiming "understanding" for Niyazov's position, he told him that no changes could be made to the status of dioceses except by a Local Council or Council of Bishops of the Church.

One Moscow priest familiar with the situation complained to Forum 18 in July 2005 that Niyazov was trying to build an independent Orthodox Church just as he had done with Islam and rejected such state interference in what he insisted was a church matter. He also complained that the Turkmen authorities had failed to issue an invitation to Patriarch Aleksii several years earlier when a visit was mooted (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=603).

Fr Ryabykh of the Moscow Patriarchate told Forum 18 that it "needed time" to make the decision. "It couldn't just be a response or reaction to a demand by a president, as if the president demands and the Church obeys," he told Forum 18. "The request was noted, some time was necessary to understand the situation and make a decision."

He added that the decision was unrelated to the death of Niyazov last December and the installation of a new president Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. "It was decided because the problem is that the central city in the Diocese, Tashkent, is too far from Turkmenistan and there is no good connection between the two states, it isn't easy to travel there and there are restrictions to do with the political regime - the situation between the two countries is difficult. Plus there is rivalry between the two states. Turkmenistan is considered to be the regional leader in Central Asia, so they don't like what they see as Uzbek influence here."

Fr Ryabykh – who was fully aware that Metropolitan Vladimir had not made a pastoral visit to Turkmenistan in recent years - said the Church had to take account of Turkmen "anxiety about political relations". "But for us what is important is that people in Turkmenistan have this pastoral care of a bishop."

Fr Ryabykh said it was too early to say how spiritual oversight would work in practice. "It could be the same as in the United States, where there are patriarchal parishes and we have a special auxiliary bishop who lives in New York. He regulates the situation. It's possible to nominate a bishop like this – canonically it's fine." Asked why the Holy Synod had taken the decision when the patriarch had earlier written that it needs to be the decision of the Local or Bishops' Council, he responded: "It will be approved at the Bishops' Council next year."

Vladimir Chernekov, a counsellor who handles Russian Orthodox issues at the Russian Embassy in Ashgabat, insisted the decision to transfer the deanery to the jurisdiction of the Patriarch was taken entirely by the Church. "The Embassy was not involved," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabat on 16 October. Indeed, he did not know that the Holy Synod had already taken the decision four days earlier. But he insisted that President Niyazov's call for this in 2005 had been a "request", not a demand.

Chernekov confirmed that Metropolitan Vladimir had not visited Turkmenistan for several years. "The Orthodox are waiting for his visit, but no date has been agreed with the government of the country. I think the government would agree to it." Asked by Forum 18 whether the government was withholding its permission, he chose his words with care: "This is concretely not agreed." Chernekov insisted that this year at least there had been no problems for Russian Orthodox priests to get visas to visit Turkmenistan, but declined to specify what problems there had been in the past.

Chernekov said the Dashoguz parish – which has had to worship in a temporary cabin for some years – does have legal status. But he said "talks are continuing" over trying to get permission for building work on the new church to restart. "The head of the local administration doesn't want it. They claim there are technical problems over the use of the land."

Chernekov added that in the past few years the Church has not been able to get permission to import literature. "We are talking about importing maybe several hundred copies of the Bible or works of the Church fathers to be given to parishes. We are not talking about individuals bringing in maybe a few books." Asked what the embassy is doing to help the Church to gain permission to import literature he responded: "This is for the parishes to resolve."

Although the Russian Orthodox Church was one of only two faiths officially allowed to function in Turkmenistan between 1997 and 2003, its life has not been easy. Its parishes applied for the compulsory re-registration in the wake of the 2003 revisions to the Religion Law, but officials deliberately dragged their feet. They gained re-registration only in November 2005. The second parish in the eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) had to wait until January 2006 for registration. The authorities have refused to allow the Church to build the new Resurrection Cathedral in Ashgabat, planned in the mid-1990s. The allocated plot in central Ashgabat remains vacant (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725).

In line with the ban on subscribing to any foreign publications, Orthodox in Turkmenistan cannot subscribe to the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate or any other Orthodox publications (see F18News 28 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=65). When the relics of two Soviet-era martyrs were taken for veneration to eight of the twelve CIS countries in 2004 and 2005, their visit to Turkmenistan was not even discussed (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=603).

In contrast to Metropolitan Vladimir's failure to visit Turkmenistan in more than four years, he has visited Kyrgyzstan "once every few months", a priest in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek told Forum 18 on 19 October. "He travels everywhere – he has recently been in the Latvian capital Riga and in Slovakia, and is here in Kyrgyzstan very frequently." He declined to speculate on why Metropolitan Vladimir had not visited Turkmenistan in recent years. The priest added that Patriarch Aleksii had visited Kyrgyzstan in 1996. He has also visited Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in recent years. (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 more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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