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TURKMENISTAN: "Prayer without state registration violates the Religion Law"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky has been warned not to meet for worship with his fellow believers, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Officials summoned me for what they said was a conversation, but at the end presented me with a pre-written statement saying that I agreed not to meet with my fellow-believers," he told Forum 18. Although Kalataevsky's congregation does not oppose state registration on principle, officials kept telling him that his congregation does not have enough adult citizen members to apply for registration. They added that unregistered religious activity, including people meeting together for worship in homes, is banned. "I asked them to show me what part of the law bans unregistered worship and they were unable to do so," Kalataevsky told Forum 18. Throughout Turkmenistan, Protestants, Muslims and people from other faiths have been this autumn stopped from exercising their right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

Within days of returning to his home town of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] after eight months in prison, Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was warned not to meet for worship with fellow-Baptists. "The officials summoned me for what they said was a conversation, but at the end presented me with a pre-written statement saying that I agreed not to meet with my fellow-believers," he told Forum 18 News Service from Turkmenbashi on 15 November. "All it lacked was my signature, but I refused to sign, both on my behalf and on behalf of my wife."

Pressure on Kalataevsky and his independent Baptist congregation not to meet for worship follows similar incidents this autumn. Throughout Turkmenistan, in incidents known to Forum 18, Protestants, Muslims and people from other faiths have been stopped from exercising their right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Sources often wish to remain anonymous, for fear of state reprisals.

Protestants told Forum 18 that, this autumn, a congregation in a remote village which they asked not be identified was raided during a worship service. Officials held the leaders, questioning and threatening them, before releasing them with fines. Officials asked why they were meeting for worship without state registration.

In another case this autumn where local believers asked that the location not be made public, Muslims tried to lodge a registration application after receiving indications that the local authorities were now prepared to accept one. However, sources told Forum 18, soon after discussing this with officials the community's leaders were warned by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police to halt the application. They were also warned not to discuss it if they did not want further problems. The community can meet for worship in a limited way.

Baptist pastor Kalataevsky was freed late on 6 November from a police holding centre on the edge of the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat]. The authorities decided to release him eight months into a three-year labour camp sentence, but continued to hold him while they decided whether or not to deport him (see F18News 8 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1044). Although born and brought up in Turkmenistan, Kalataevsky is a Ukrainian citizen. To secure his release from prison, Kalataevsky's wife Valentina was required to sign a document that he would abide by the law

Kalataevsky told Forum 18 that an official of the city hyakimlik (administration) telephoned to summon him and his wife Valentina to a meeting on 13 November. When they arrived, they found a five-member commission awaiting them. The commission was chaired by city official Bahar Komerkova, and was also attended by representatives of trade unions and the youth movement, as well as an elder and the imam who works as the city representative of the Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs. Kalataevsky said the meeting lasted about 40 minutes.

He reported that while his congregation does not oppose state registration on principle, the officials kept telling him that his congregation does not have enough adult citizen members to apply for registration. They added that unregistered religious activity is banned. "I asked them to show me what part of the law bans unregistered worship and they were unable to do so," Kalataevsky told Forum 18. Under the 2004 amendments to the Religion Law, only five adult citizens are required to register a "religious group".

"At the end of the meeting, the imam told me that if I continued my religious activity he could promise me an unpleasant fate," Kalataevsky told Forum 18. "It was a sort of threat. When I asked if he was trying to intimidate me, he insisted he was not. But he explained that gathering people to pray without state registration violates the Religion Law."

Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials at the hyakimlik why they threatened Kalataevsky if he meets for worship with his fellow-Baptists. City official Komerkova's telephone went unanswered on 20 and 21 November.

Forum 18 reached one of the hyakimlik's religious affairs officials, Guzel Orazurbieva, who denied that there are any Protestant churches in Turkmenbashi. Asked what communities exist, she said a Sunni mosque, an Azerbaijani Shia mosque and a Russian Orthodox church. Asked about other communities – such as Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and Hare Krishna devotees – she responded: "We have only the Russian Orthodox church." Asked about why Baptist pastor Kalataevsky was summoned and threatened not to meet with his fellow-believers for worship she responded: "I'm not informed about that". She then put the phone down.

Despite Orazurbieva's claims that only three religious communities function in Turkmenbashi, which has a population of 50,000 people, other religious communities are known to exist.

Orazurbieva failed to mention that the Shia mosque for the city's ethnic Azeri population has not yet been able to gain state registration. In the past the mosque faced severe restrictions. The previous imam – an Azerbaijani citizen – was forced to leave Turkmenistan in about 2005 as the authorities would not allow him to remain. He had lived in Turkmenbashi for more than ten years. Since then the community has not had a trained imam.

In some earlier years the MSS secret police would ban Shia Muslims from gathering in the mosque on Ashura, a key Shia commemoration. In December 2003, the secret police broke up a commemoration at the mosque for the deceased President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev (see F18News 21 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=234).

One community in the city which has been unable to revive its activity is the Armenian Apostolic church. Its 100-year-old church was ordered to be destroyed in February 2005 (see F18News 23 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=786). However, sources told Forum 18 that when workmen were destroying the church a mysterious flood of water sprung up from below the half-demolished building. So workers sealed what they had not destroyed while reporting to the authorities that they had completed the task. The Armenian Church has not been able to revive its activity in Turkmenistan, despite a long-standing Armenian community in the country.

In July 2005 a privately-owned Sunni mosque in Turkmenbashi was also destroyed (see F18News 23 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=786).

Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, brushed off all suggestions that religious communities – including the one led by Kalataevsky – are restricted. Asked what progress there has been for communities seeking state registration, he responded: "We're studying this." He could name only two religious communities which have been able to gain legal status in 2007, a mosque in Ahal Region – the region that surrounds Ashgabad – and the Protestant Word of Life congregation in the north-eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew). Gurbanov refused to answer any more questions and put the phone down.

Other religious communities which have applied for state registration have not been registered. One community which met at the Gengeshi with Gurbanov's predecessor, Murad Karriyev, told Forum 18 that he had described the decision to allow nine religious minority communities to register in 2004 as a "mistake". The decision – the first time any non-Muslim or non-Russian Orthodox communities had been able to gain legal status since 1997 – came amid intense international pressure on then Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov to ease the harsh restrictions on religious activity.

Despite some easing of restrictions before President Niyazov died, since Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov became President, state officials have increased pressures with threats, intermittent raids and fines, travel bans on prominent religious activists, denial of legal status and censorship of all religious literature. At the time of Niyazov's death, some noted that officials have a vested interest in repression continuing (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894). As the threats to Kalataevsky in Turkmenbashi show, state officials, along with some local imams, still harass religious believers and communities (see eg. F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963). (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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