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TURKMENISTAN: Baptist forced to leave homeland, mullah still held in psychiatric hospital?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Freed from prison in November, Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky - a Ukrainian citizen - has failed in his attempt to remain with his wife, children and his congregation in his native town of Turkmenbashi. He is due to leave on a flight to Moscow on 11 December. Officials refused to explain their denial of a visa. "But of course it is linked to my activity as a believer," he told Forum 18 News Service. "Everything that has happened to me since 2001 is related to that." His congregation has no other pastor. Meanwhile, former enforced psychiatric hospital detainee Kakabai Tejenov told Forum 18 that among the fellow detainees was a mullah, who arrived at the closed hospital in Lebap Region in late 2006. Forum 18 has been unable to find out the mullah's name or if he is still being held. "If he is still being detained, I want him to be freed," Tejenov declared. Also, 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness Ashirgeldy Taganov still awaits possible trial for refusing compulsory military service.

Embattled Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky - freed from detention in early November after eight months in prison - has been denied permission to remain in his native town of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbaşy, formerly Krasnovodsk]. A Ukrainian citizen, his application for a visa to remain with his wife and family has been rejected by the Migration Service and he will have to leave the country, as he told Forum 18 News Service from the town on 3 December. Meanwhile, mystery surrounds the fate of a mullah reported by a fellow prisoner to have been forcibly held in a psychiatric hospital in the north-eastern Lebap Region in late 2006. "Police were very harsh towards him and prevented him from speaking at length to others being held there," Kakabai Tejenov told Forum 18 from exile in Russia on 3 December. "If he is still being detained, I want him to be freed." Forum 18 has been unable to find out from any official if the mullah is still being held.

The telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 3 and 4 December.

Kalataevsky, who leads a small independent Baptist congregation in Turkmenbashi, said the Migration Service in the town had on 26 November verbally rejected his application for a visa and residence permit to remain in Turkmenistan. "Nothing was given in writing," he told Forum 18. "Nor did they give a reason - by law they are not required to. But of course it is linked to my activity as a believer. Everything that has happened to me since 2001 is related to that."

Kalataevsky was summarily deported in 2001 to punish him for leading his congregation. He soon returned to Turkmenistan, where his family remained. When he tried to regularise his situation earlier this year he was arrested, tried and found guilty of "illegally crossing the border". His three-year labour camp sentence was cut short when he was amnestied in October, but he was not finally freed until 6 November. Within a week of returning home to Turkmenbashi he was warned not to meet for worship with his fellow-Baptists (see F18News 21 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1050>).

Kalataevsky said he is the only pastor in his congregation. "The church wants me to remain here as its leader - there is no other pastor."

Kalataevsky insists he is law-abiding and will therefore leave the country, but is sad over the decision. "This is a shame - I had hoped to remain here with my wife and children," he told Forum 18. "I was born here and my parents and brother live here also." He said he has already bought an air-ticket for Moscow for 11 December. He added that the Migration Service suggested that his wife Valentina officially invite him to return. "But I don't know how they will respond to that."

An official of the Migration Service in Turkmenbashi, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 on 4 December that he was not aware of Kalataevsky's case. But he rejected suggestions that the decision could have been taken to punish Kalataevsky for his religious activity. "The Migration Service doesn't punish anyone," he claimed. However, the official insisted that all decisions to grant or withhold visas are taken in Ashgabat [Ashgabat]. "We just accept the applications and pass them to the capital. We're just little people."

Meanwhile, the first the outside world knew of the detained mullah was from an open letter from Tejenov, a former prisoner of

conscience freed in October 2006 from the psychiatric hospital in Garashsyzyk District (formerly Boyunuzyn) in Lebap Region. The psychiatric hospital, housed in a former Soviet pioneer camp, is under the jurisdiction of the Health Ministry. Tejenov issued his open letter through the Moscow-based human rights group Memorial in October 2007 after being able to emigrate to Russia.

Tejenov told Forum 18 that the Sunni mullah - whose name he did not know - was from a village in the Kaakhka District south-east of the capital Ashgabad. He was detained by the police or the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police after "criticising the inadequacies of life in Turkmenistan" in sermons in his mosque, he added. The mullah arrived in the psychiatric hospital in late August or early September 2006. Tejenov said the mullah was placed in the hospital's first section, a closed block where he was also held.

"He was a real mullah," Tejenov recalled. "A strong man, perhaps in his early fifties, with a black beard which was going slightly grey. Five times a day he would pray in the small yard - no-one stopped him from doing that." He says the mullah was in a room with a drug-addict who had murdered his parents. "He looked after him. Religion tells people to look after others, and that's what he did."

Tejenov told Forum 18 that since his own release from the psychiatric hospital in October 2006 he has had no information about other inmates. "It is a closed hospital and no letters or phone calls are allowed, so I have no way to find out if the mullah is still being held or not."

Forum 18 has been unable to find the name of the chief doctor or the telephone number of the psychiatric hospital in Garashsyzyk District to find out the name of the mullah or to find out if he is still being held. Officials of the Health Ministry in Ashgabad declined to give the number to Forum 18 on 4 December.

Tejenov, who is now 71, was forcibly held and abused in the psychiatric hospital to punish him for compiling human rights reports. "Staff use medicines to destroy people's health - I was injected with aminazin and haloperidol." Both of these anti-psychotic drugs were also widely abused during the Soviet period in the enforced mistreatment of dissidents.

Farid Tukhbatullin, who heads the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, says Tejenov is not the only dissident to have been forcibly detained in psychiatric hospital in recent years in Turkmenistan. "Healthy people who criticised the regime have been punished with forced treatment for their 'illness'," Tukhbatullin told Forum 18 on 4 December. He says access to such close institutions is almost impossible. "It is difficult even for relatives to get in, so it will be difficult to find out if the mullah is still being detained."

Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and a Hare Krishna devotee have been imprisoned in recent years to punish them for their religious activities. Among Muslim prisoners, an imam Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych who had translated the Koran into Turkmen was arrested in 2000 after criticising the religious policies of the then president Saparmurat Niyazov. He was imprisoned, but then transferred to internal exile shortly afterwards. Already in his seventies, he died a year or two later in internal exile.

The most high-profile Muslim prisoner was the former Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who was serving a 22-year sentence on charges the authorities repeatedly refused to make public. He was among a group of eleven prisoners freed under presidential amnesty in August 2007. After his release he was assigned to work as a specialist in the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs (see F18News 9 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1031>).

The religious believers currently known to be serving sentences are Bayram Ashirgeldyyev and Begench Shakhmuradov. Both are Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to do compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Shakhmuradov received a two year suspended sentence in September 2007, and Ashirgeldyyev was given an 18 month suspended sentence in July 2007. Neither was included in the recent prisoner amnesty that saw three other Jehovah's Witnesses freed from their sentences (see F18News 8 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1044>).

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses report that Ashirgeldy Taganov, an 18-year-old from Ashgabad whose nickname is Azis, is still awaiting possible prosecution for refusing military service. "We have not heard anything further on this case since then," they told Forum 18 on 3 December.

After telling the conscription board on 1 October that he was rejecting military service, Taganov was called to the Prosecutor's Office of Ashgabad's Niyazov District on 2 November. There he was interrogated by an officer named A. Khandurdyev. He was told that his family members would also be interviewed and then the case would be filed in court (see F18News 8 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1044>). (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>.

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>>.

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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