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UZBEKISTAN: Harsh border cuts Muslims off from Turkmen holy sites

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

High Turkmen visa fees make it prohibitively expensive for many Uzbek Muslims living close to the western border with Turkmenistan from crossing over to visit family graveyards and places of pilgrimage, Forum 18 News Service has learnt in the Khorezm region of western Uzbekistan. "We can see our forebears' graves through the barbed wire, but if we want to reach them and perform religious rituals, we have to pay money to the Turkmen," the imam of Manak village, Nodyr Formanov, told Forum 18. "The visa regime between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan clearly encroaches on believers' rights," complained Vladimir Artemyev, director of the Uzbek branch of a UNESCO project for the preservation of ancient monuments.

Local residents along Uzbekistan's western border with Turkmenistan have complained of procedures imposed by the Turkmen authorities that make crossing the border to visit holy sites difficult and expensive, Forum 18 News Service has learnt on a visit to the Khorezm region of western Uzbekistan. Local residents are required to pay six US dollars to cross the border, a substantial sum in a region where the average monthly salary is no more than twenty US dollars. "My mother and father are buried in a cemetery across the border in Turkmenistan," local resident Rakhim Yusupov told Forum 18 in the village of Shavat on 12 July. "As Muslims we simply have to visit the graves of the whole family's forebears. I have a wife and five children, so every time we want to honour the memory of our parents I have to pay the Turkmen 42 dollars!"

Nearby Manak village – half-way from Shavat to the border with Turkmenistan – is in Uzbekistan, but the village cemetery is on the other side of the border. The imam of the local mosque, Nodyr Formanov, describes the situation as "quite ridiculous". "We can see our forebears' graves through the barbed wire, but if we want to reach them and perform religious rituals, we have to pay money to the Turkmen," he told Forum 18 in Manak on 13 July.

"In February 2001 Turkmenistan unilaterally introduced a visa regime with Uzbekistan," Babakhan Islamov, head of the Shavat district administration, told Forum 18 on 12 July in Shavat, which is half way between the Uzbek city of Urgench and the Turkmen city of Tashauz. To cross the border, Uzbek citizens have to obtain a visa at the Turkmen embassy in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. However, the Turkmen government introduced a slight concession for residents in the border regions, who can buy a visa costing six US dollars at the border itself.

"We don't ask for any money from Turkmen citizens travelling here, but the Turkmen side makes them buy an exit visa costing around two dollars," Islamov pointed out.

Vladimir Artemyev, director of the Uzbek branch of a UNESCO project for the preservation of ancient monuments, explains that when the border between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was drawn in 1924 it divided a single ethno-cultural region – the former territory of the Khorezm state. He says a number of holy places honoured by Uzbek Muslims and the Uzbek people ended up in Turkmenistan. Even the capital of the Khorezm state – now the city of Konya-Urgench, where many holy places honoured by Muslims have been preserved – ended up in Turkmenistan.

"So long as the border remained just a formal line on the map, this division had virtually no impact on people's lives," Artemyev told Forum 18 in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 14 July. "But since becoming a state border, the 'landmine planted by cartographers in Moscow' has become a serious problem in relations between the two independent states."

Uzbeks form the second largest ethnic minority in Turkmenistan, representing around 10 per cent of the population. In districts across the border from Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan autonomous republic and Khorezm region, ethnic Uzbeks make up as much as half the population.

The introduction of a visa regime for people living in the border regions has led to bloody clashes. When a crowd of Uzbeks tried to reach their ancestors' cemetery across the border without obtaining visas in December 2001, Turkmen border guards opened fire and wounded several people.

"The introduction of a visa regime is making it hard for Khorezm Uzbeks to carry out religious rituals," Artemyev told Forum 18. He said in particular the mosques in Konya-Urgench are places of pilgrimage for Muslims which were traditionally visited by Uzbek residents. Another site revered by Muslims is the ancient Klavlyuiya cemetery, 60 kilometres (35 miles) north of Tashauz. He also cited many lesser-known cemeteries in the border districts of Turkmenistan where Uzbek relatives are buried. "The visa regime between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan clearly encroaches on believers' rights," Artemyev declared.

Uzbek officials are wary about speaking of such a delicate issue. "I'm not going to deny that there is a problem for believers in the regions bordering Turkmenistan," the chairman of the Uzbek government's committee for religious affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, told Forum 18 on 15 July in Tashkent. "But we are not empowered to set policy, and so I will not make any comment."

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY