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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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TURKMENISTAN: Fines, beatings, threats of rape and psychiatric incarceration

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

Bilbil Kulyyeva was threatened with incarceration in a psychiatric hospital if she did not stop complaining about punishments imposed for following her faith as a Jehovah's Witness, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Officials threatened to put her two small children in a children's home and deport the other two. In June, police threatened another female Jehovah's Witness with rape. She was held overnight and freed the following day only after she had been forced to clean the police station and water plants outside. Four Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten and fined in May after refusing police and MSS secret police pressure to declare: "I am a Muslim." Police and the MSS secret police often work closely with local imams to intimidate Jehovah's Witnesses as well as Protestant Christians. The Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a formal registration application in August, but have had no response. Forum 18 could find no official prepared to explain why Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other faiths face harassment.

In recent months, Jehovah's Witnesses have been beaten, threatened with rape, fined and had religious literature confiscated across Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After Bilbil Kulyyeva, a mother of four who lives in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], filed official complaints against harassment of her and her family on 24 October, the authorities threatened to lock her up in a psychiatric hospital, place her two underage children in a children's home and deport the other two, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They say she is now contemplating seeking asylum abroad. Police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police often work closely with local imams to intimidate Jehovah's Witnesses as well as Protestant Christians, Forum 18 has found. Meanwhile, the Jehovah's Witnesses' application for legal status – lodged on 21 August - remains stalled.

Other religious minority communities have reported fewer cases of serious harassment this year, although a Protestant church in the south-eastern town of Mary was raided in February and the Greater Grace Protestant church in Ashgabad had a Bible study class raided in April (see F18News 18 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1116).

Protestants have told Forum 18 that lower level harassment continued through the year, though pressure is increasing again. Protestants in Serdarabad district near the north-eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) in Lebap Region have again come under pressure from local imams in November. Forum 18 has learnt that the pressure on local Protestants increased after a senior religious affairs official visited the region from Ashgabad. Local Protestants faced similar pressure in May 2007 (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963).

Protestants told Forum 18 that police raided Protestant meetings in a village elsewhere in Lebap Region in mid-November. They threatened the Protestants so much that they are now afraid to meet.

The official who on 25 November answered the telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, deputy head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, repeatedly put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 tried to ask about the threats to Kulyyeva and other Jehovah's Witnesses and the stalling of the community's registration application.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why the application has received no response or whether the Gengeshi has passed it on to the Justice Ministry, the body that actually grants legal status. No official of the Ministry's registration department was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 25 November. "We don't give out information by phone," one woman told Forum 18.

Unavailable on 25 November was Shirin Akhmedova, Director of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, her colleagues told Forum 18.

Kulyyeva has long faced harassment for her faith. In 2004, she was forcibly evicted from the hostel where she and her four children had been living since her husband's parents drove her from their home (see F18News 31 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=501). Without having a permanent address, her children were long denied proper documentation. After her repeated complaints, three of them were eventually given identity cards with a residence permit for Ashgabad. However, one son still does not have any identity document. She has also been dismissed from a number of jobs because of her faith.

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Kulyyeva has filed official complaints with various state agencies about the harassment, but in vain. Jehovah's Witnesses say she also complained to the Ashgabad office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). But it was in the wake of her complaints to the Presidential Commission on Law-Enforcement Agencies, Prosecutor General's office and the Interior Ministry – which she filed on 24 October – that the threats of incarceration in a psychiatric hospital came.

The Turkmen authorities are known to incarcerate political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals, though this has occasionally also been used as a punishment against religious believers.

Pretending that Jehovah's Witnesses resemble wanted suspects is a common police tactic, Forum 18 has found. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that on 5 October, Igor Nazarov was detained by police with his family while they were leaving a private home in Ashgabad. Police claimed he looked like a suspect in a recent burglary.

At the police station they were searched. When officers found Nazarov's Bible, they said they were searching for such literature since "all such items are subject to confiscation". In addition to regular police, officers from the MSS secret police and the Police's 6th Department that handles organised crime and terrorism also took part, as well as a representative from the Religion Affairs Department of the local hyakimlik (administration). Nazarov and his family were held for three hours. When Nazarov asked for his Bible to be returned he was told it would be given to the Justice Ministry and thus could not be returned.

On 30 August, police in Ashgabad detained two Jehovah's Witnesses who had just left a fellow-believer's home. Officers claimed they were investigating a burglary in the same building. The home owner and a visiting Jehovah's Witness were also detained. Seven MSS officers – who were known to the Jehovah's Witnesses for earlier harassment in the same district of the capital - interrogated each one separately. Despite threats the four refused to sign a statement. So the officers wrote that they had confiscated Bibles from persons suspected of holding an "illegal meeting". The Jehovah's Witnesses were freed after four hours' detention.

On 19 June three Jehovah's Witnesses were waiting at Ashgabad station for a train back to their home city of Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) in western Turkmenistan when police claimed they resembled suspects in a criminal case. At the police station their belongings were searched and personal Bibles and Bible study aids were found. The three were taken across the road to a MSS building, where they were question by ten officers. They were pressured to write statements but refused. One of the three, Timur Bazarov, was then taken to another room and beaten, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The three were filmed on video and then released.

Another of the three, Kasym Joraev, had already been abused by police officers six weeks earlier. He and three other Jehovah's Witnesses he shares a home with in Balkanabad - Kurban Zakirov, Shatlyk Adylov and Farkhatjan Seyidov - were severely beaten by police who raided the flat on 6 May. They were then taken to the police station where beatings were resumed. Police and MSS officers demanded that they pronounce the words: "I am a Muslim." The police chief and a judge asked them to sign a record. They agreed only after further beatings, including with a rubber cable.

All four were fined 1,250,000 Manats (1,657 Norwegian Kroner, 184 Euros or 240 US Dollars). No documents were given to them, so it remains unknown on what charges they were punished. Police also seized a computer, money, Zakirov's passport and documents for the flat.

Police and MSS officers also appear to be working closely with local imams in attempts to pressure Jehovah's Witnesses to stop their religious activity, Forum 18 has found. When two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in Mary on 23 May by anti-terrorism police, they took them by car to the regional imam. They were held for three hours and freed after their religious literature was confiscated.

Among five intruders who broke down the door of a private home in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashy, formerly Krasnovodsk] on 15 June during a Bible study was the city's imam, Chary Mommalyev. Also present was Murad Ashirov of the hyakimlik's Religious Affairs Department and the local police officer. "They asked questions and carried out a home search," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "They threatened and mocked the householder, Tatyana Dulya, and her guests. The ordeal was especially frightening to Dulya's nine and four year-old children."

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Mommalyev, the imam, took part in the raid on members of a different religious community. His brother said he was not at home when Forum 18 called on 25 November.

When two Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in Hojambaz in the south-eastern Lebap Region on 2 June, they were taken first to the police station. Then an MSS officer took them to imam Yarash Muradov, who heads the Religious Affairs Department at the local hyakimlik. There they were questioned for more than three hours and warned that preaching their faith to others violates the law. A Turkmen-language Bible and other publications were confiscated.

Two days later a female Jehovah's Witness in the same town was detained. Police threatened her with rape, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. She was held overnight and freed the following day only after she had been forced to clean the police station and water plants outside.

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Among other harassment this year, on 31 May MSS officers broke their way into a flat in Turkmenabad owned by a Jehovah's Witness. All those present were taken to the police station, had Bibles and other religious literature confiscated and were threatened with 15-day prison terms. After six hours they were freed.

On 4 July, the district police officer came to the home of Begench Suvkhanov in the northern city of Dashoguz [Dashowuz] and summoned him to the city hyakimlik's Religious Affairs Department. Men who were apparently from the MSS interrogated him about whether he reads Jehovah's Witness publications, whether he had any and how he gets hold of them. They also questioned him about internal Jehovah's Witness documents apparently confiscated from others earlier. They drove him home that evening to confiscate literature from his home, but Suvkhanov's wife refused to unlock a room in the house. Then the couple and their 7-year-old daughter were taken to the hyakimlik. Despite threats to imprison them they were freed later that evening.

Some days later Suvkhanov was taken to the MSS, but officers did not appear hostile to his faith and he was freed with no further action.

On 7 May, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were taken to the city hyakimlik in Turkmenbashi where they were told an order had been issued to crush all Jehovah's Witness activity. The two refused to sign any statements and were put in cells at the police station. Their identity documents were confiscated. That evening they were freed, but immediately detained on the street for having no identity documents. They were put overnight in a sobering-up station. They following morning they were made to stand outside in the yard of the hyakimlik, where police officers holding a meeting outside made fun of them. Only at 4 pm, after standing outside all day, were they released.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that they decided to lodge a registration application not because they believe it will be successful, but because they want to give the government the opportunity to show whether it is prepared to abide by the law.

On 21 July, Jehovah's Witnesses conducted a constituent assembly needed to formally found a religious organisation and apply for legal recognition. The 54 founding members adopted the charter and prepared other necessary paperwork.

On 21 August, Andrei Zhbanov and Aleksandr Zorin from the presiding committee visited the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs. They presented the application and accompanying documentation to Deputy Chairman Gurbanov. However, since then the community has heard nothing, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 25 November.

Officials have told foreign visitors in recent months that 122 religious communities currently have legal status. They say 94 are Sunni Muslim, 5 Shia Muslim, 13 Russian Orthodox and 10 of other communities. While these figures are credible, they reveal the failure of the authorities to register all the communities that have applied for registration. Forum 18 knows of several which have had repeated denials of their applications, with officials claiming to find numerous "errors" in the paperwork.

Many religious communities have told Forum 18 that registration is not worth having, as it leads to greater state control and pressure to collaborate with the authorities and to provide information on members and activities to the MSS secret police and other officials. Registration is often no help in being able to find a legal place for a religious community to hold worship services, while free construction of places of worship is de facto banned.

The Turkmen authorities are still obstructing some religious believers from leaving the country for religious purposes, including for Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, the authorities are refusing to allow local religious communities to receive visits from fellow-believers abroad (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219). (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 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.

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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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