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TURKMENISTAN: "I want to know if I can import religious books"

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

Turkmenistan continues to impose strict censorship on religious literature brought into the country, and copies data from personal computers, Forum 18 News Service has been told. "Which commission decides this?" a Protestant complained, commenting that "they don't have the right to interfere in my own private life." Officials always point to an unspecified "commission" which determines what literature is acceptable. "But who checks the commission which examines the literature?" the Protestant asked. Ethnic Turkmens appear to be more more likely to have material confiscated than ethnic Russians. Frustration has also been expressed to Forum 18 about the impossibility of printing religious literature. No state official has been willing to explain why religious censorship exists, or who is responsible for it. Shirin Akhmedova, Head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, claimed to the UN Human Rights Council that freedom of expression exists because of the Constitution. This claim, however, is contradicted by the experience of Turkmenistan's citizens.

Customs officials at Turkmenistan's capital's Ashgabad [Ashgabat] airport continue to confiscate religious literature they find on people returning to the country, Baptist leader Shageldy Atakov complained to Forum 18 News Service on 8 May from his home in the village of Kaakhka. Other Protestants have expressed frustration over the impossibility of printing religious literature in Turkmenistan or importing it into the country. "I want to know if I can import religious books into the country," one Ashgabad-based Protestant, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. "I and my friends have even had Bible calendars and postcards with Bible verses confiscated. Which commission decides this?" No official has been prepared to explain to Forum 18 why such religious censorship exists.

The Ashgabad Protestant notes from experience that ethnic Turkmen Christians are more likely to have religious literature seized from them than ethnic Russian Christians or, if it is seized, are less likely to be able to get it back. "One ethnic Russian woman had a new, second copy of the Bible confiscated from her at the airport," the Protestant recalled. "She wrote an appeal and was able to get it back from the airport the following day."

Computers are seized at Ashgabad airport from religious believers returning to Turkmenistan, the Protestant complained, and data is copied. "They don't have the right to interfere in my own private life," the Protestant told Forum 18.

Officials always point to an unspecified "commission", the Protestant said, which determines which religious literature is acceptable and which not. "But who checks the commission which examines the literature?"

Continuing confiscations

On 7 February, Natalya Dzyuba, a Baptist from the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk], had 33 Russian-language Christian books and copies of the Russian-language Council of Churches magazine "Herald of Truth" confiscated as she returned via Ashgabad airport on a flight from Moscow. "Customs officials drew up a list and confiscated all the books and journals," local Baptists told Forum 18 from Turkmenistan on 11 February. "They even tried to confiscate her personal Bible." The Baptists say all the books were for herself and her friends.

Baptists told Forum 18 that when she complained about the confiscations, officials told her that the books and magazines would be sent for a check-up to the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs and she should talk to them.

Other Protestants, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals, have told Forum 18 that some of their colleagues returning to Turkmenistan through Ashgabad airport in March have had all their Christian literature, personal notes and – in a couple of cases – laptop computers confiscated by the Customs. The Protestants told Forum 18 that the books were not returned. The computers were returned several weeks later, but Christian Bible programs on them in Turkmen and Russian had been deleted.

Religious literature is frequently confiscated from religious believers, especially members of unregistered religious communities, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Officials frequently interrogate them about whether they read such literature, whether they have it and, if so, where they acquire it (see F18News 25 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1221).

Why is religious literature censored?

Turkmenistan's religious censorship is theoretically in the hands of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, as set out in Article 20 of the Religion Law. However, it remains unclear who is on the Gengeshi commission which examines literature, and how it reaches decisions as to what literature is unacceptable and why. Most religious communities who ask for permission to import religious literature have their requests rejected, religious leaders have told Forum 18. It also remains unclear what role in confiscating religious literature is taken by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. Publishing religious literature in Turkmenistan is almost impossible.

Reached on 8 May, the man who answered the telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Head of the government's Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, twice put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask questions. The phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 12 May.

Forum 18 also tried to find out how local religious affairs officials handle assessments of religious literature received or requested by local religious believers or confiscated from them. Bazar Hojaev, chief imam and local religious affairs official for Mary Velayat (Region) in south-eastern Turkmenistan, told Forum 18 on 12 May that "a person takes and reads it". He refused to say whether this is a local or an Ashgabad-based official or why this is necessary. He dismissed any concerns. "It's not a problem," he claimed. Many local religious affairs offices are headed by the government-appointed local chief imam.

The imam refused to discuss any further aspect of the censorship system and referred Forum 18 to another Mary-based religious affairs official named Serdar (he refused to give his family name). When Forum 18 called Serdar the same day and presented its questions the connection was cut. Further calls went unanswered.

Across the country in Turkmenbashi, Forum 18 reached the office on 12 May of city religious affairs official Guzel Orazurbieva. Her colleague asked Forum 18 to call back in ten minutes. When Forum 18 called back, the colleague said she had just left the office. Later calls also failed to reach her.

Turkmenistan's censorship of religious literature was criticised by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, who visited Turkmenistan in September 2008. In her 12 January 2009 report of the visit (A/HRC/10/8/Add.4), she urged an end to such "undue limitations" on religious material, which she said violate freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

Jahangir pointed out that when the Gengeshi allows a religious community to import religious literature, it limits the numbers of copies of an item to the number of members of a registered religious community. Forum 18 has heard similar complaints. Jahangir also pointed out that apart from copies of the Koran, "it seems to be difficult to find religious literature in bookshops and libraries". She cited the case of a local person who went to the international post office to collect a parcel of religious books from Russia, only to be told that as the parcel contained Bibles the Gengeshi would need to determine whether the individual was "authorised" to receive it or not.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Shirin Akhmedova, Head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, why Turkmenistan confiscates religious publications and imposes censorship on religious literature. Her phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7, 8 and 12 May.

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on 19 March 2009 in response to recommendations to Turkmenistan as part of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of its human rights record by the Council, Akhmedova claimed, wrongly, that because Turkmenistan's Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression, people in Turkmenistan can freely express their beliefs and convictions, and seek and receive information and ideas in any form, including in the press and in the media. (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.

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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