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TURKMENISTAN: Why can't all Muslims make haj pilgrimage?

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

Unlike in 2009, when no pilgrims were allowed to travel, Turkmenistan is allowing a group of pilgrims to take part in the Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca in November – but only 188 people. In the past this figure has included members of the MSS secret police, to monitor pilgrims, and it also seems that – as usual - would-be pilgrims will not be allowed to travel separately from the government-approved group. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that at least one would-be independent pilgrim has been denied a Saudi Arabian haj visa, because the individual was not on the Turkmen government list. "In practice the Saudi Arabian Embassy won't give them a visa unless they are on the list approved by the Turkmen authorities. They refuse them on various pretexts," one Ashgabad resident complained to Forum 18. Turkmen officials have often claimed that Turkmen residents are allowed to go on the haj independently of the small government-sponsored group. However, Forum 18 has not found any independent confirmation that this has been allowed by either Turkmenistan or Saudi Arabia.

Unlike in 2009, when no pilgrims were allowed to travel, Turkmenistan's government has announced that a group of pilgrims will be allowed to take part in the Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca in November – but only 188 people. In the past this figure has included members of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, to monitor pilgrims. And it appears that, as in earlier years, would-be pilgrims will not be able to take part outside the small, government-approved group. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that at least one would-be independent pilgrim has been denied a Saudi Arabian haj visa, because the individual was not on the Turkmen government list.

Turkmenistan is thought to have been allocated an annual haj quota by the Saudi Arabian authorities of around 5,000 pilgrims (see F18News 14 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1062). However, Saudi authorities have repeatedly (including this year) refused to confirm this when asked by Forum 18.

The telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], went unanswered on 18 October. Also unanswered was the telephone of Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, Director of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, as well as those of her colleagues.

While all faiths are kept under tight government control, Islam – the majority faith in Turkmenistan – remains under the tightest government control. The government names all senior imams, who also hold a state role in the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs overseeing non-Muslim faiths also (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

Islamic education is also tightly controlled. The only permitted higher-level religious education within Turkmenistan is the study of theology at Magtymguly Turkmen State University in Ashgabad. This is confined to Islam and accepts only 10 students per year – and is only open to men. No men who have studied Islam elsewhere are allowed to become imams (see F18News 24 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1492).

Publication of Islamic literature is strictly limited (see F18News 12 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294), while decisions on when and where to build new mosques appear to be taken by the government, not by the Muslim community (see the Forum 18 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167).

Formal religious education, religious publication and freely building and opening new places of worship are almost impossible for non-Muslim faiths too. Among the crackdown on minority faiths, ten Jehovah's Witnesses are serving criminal sentences for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, seven of them in labour camps (see F18News 4 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495). Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev is due to go on trial on 21 October at Mary Town Court on charges his community insists are fabricated (see F18News 18 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1499).

Exit bans - including a total ban on Muslims taking part in the 2009 haj - are part of the state's policy to isolate religious believers from fellow-believers in other countries (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

Small, government-controlled group of haj pilgrims only

The first public announcement that the Turkmen authorities would be allowing at least a small number of pilgrims to travel on this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which takes place in November, came on 14 October. The state-run media reported a cabinet meeting that day chaired by President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov which indicated that a group would travel between 2 and 22 November and that the issue was being handled by Deputy Prime Minister Hydyr Saparliev.

At the meeting, President Berdimukhamedov signed an instruction authorising 188 pilgrims to travel and ordering the state-run Turkmenistan Airlines to provide a Boeing 757 to transport them to Saudi Arabia and back at the airline's expense. Interestingly, the seating in Boeing 757 airliners is typically arranged to carry more than 188 passengers.

Officials of the Consular Department of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad have repeatedly declined to say what the quota allocated to pilgrims from Turkmenistan is, how many haj visas they are issuing this year to Turkmen residents and whether such visas are available only to the small, government-approved group or to would-be pilgrims who wish to travel independently.

"We don't know in advance how many pilgrims will go," one Embassy official told Forum 18 on 21 September, resolutely refusing to answer Forum 18's questions. "Only God knows." Similarly on 14 October, the day the President announced the Turkmen government-approved group, Saudi Arabian Embassy officials refused to say.

How are state-controlled pilgrims chosen

Forum 18 tried to find out on 18 October how many pilgrims are due to travel on the haj from different regions of Turkmenistan and how they were chosen. An official of the Dashoguz Regional Gengeshi refused to discuss this, referring Forum 18 to the Foreign Ministry in Ashgabad. An official of Lebap Regional Gengeshi told Forum 18 that he did not know the number chosen. He said that the region currently has no Regional Imam (and regional religious affairs official) and referred Forum 18 to the Gengeshi in Ashgabad.

An official of Mary Regional Gengeshi said about 30 pilgrims are due to travel from that region, but declined to say if they have already been selected and how, and whether they have been informed that they have been included. The official insisted Forum 18 should talk to Regional Imam Bazar Hojaev (who is also the regional state religious affairs official), but he was not in the office.

Sources in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 that the central Gengeshi is responsible for granting permission to make the haj pilgrimage, but that would-be pilgrims first have to gain permission and have their documents processed through the local religious affairs official in the hyakimlik (administration) where they live (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

No information is available on the criteria used to allocate MSS secret police and other officials to the pilgrimage group.

"In theory pilgrims can go independently, but in practice.."

"In theory pilgrims can go independently," one Ashgabad resident told Forum 18 on 18 October. "But in practice the Saudi Arabian Embassy won't give them a visa unless they are on the list approved by the Turkmen authorities. They refuse them on various pretexts." The Ashgabad resident complained that the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad appears to fulfil the wishes of the Turkmen authorities.

The Ashgabad resident told of one would-be pilgrim who this year sought a haj visa from the Saudi Arabian Embassy but was told "gently" that they should gain a place on the official list approved by the Turkmen government and handed to the Embassy.

Turkmen officials have often claimed that Turkmen residents are allowed to go on the haj independently of the small government-sponsored group. However, Forum 18 has not found any independent confirmation that this has been allowed by either Turkmenistan or Saudi Arabia. Some pilgrims are said to travel via other countries without informing the authorities that they are going on haj. But the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad confirmed to Forum 18 in December 2007 – as is apparently still its practice - that it had issued haj visas that year only for those on the government-sponsored aeroplane.

Gengeshi Deputy Chair Gurbanov claimed to Forum 18 in September that other pilgrims would be able to travel by "different channels" under "private arrangements that the Gengeshi has no involvement in". Asked how these pilgrims would be able to make independent arrangements, he responded: "I don't know" (see F18News 24 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1492).

History of state restrictions on haj

The haj pilgrimage is compulsory at least once in their lifetime for Muslims, who are not prevented by factors such as cost and ill health, within Dhu al-Hijja (the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar).

The quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi Arabian authorities is believed to be about 5,000. However, since independence the Turkmen government has allowed only one, government-sponsored aeroplane of pilgrims to travel on the haj each year. Between 2005 and 2008, this was 188 people, including the state officials who travel as part of the pilgrimage party to monitor the pilgrims. In 2009, the Turkmen government banned the 188 pilgrims from going at all, citing health concerns over the H1N1 virus (see F18News 10 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1487).

Was imam's transfer a state or Muslim community initiative?

Current Mary Regional Imam and senior regional religious affairs official Hojaev previously also held this post until September 2009, when he was transferred to Ashgabad, apparently as part of government-imposed changes in the leadership of the Muslim community (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

The official in Mary confirmed to Forum 18 that Hojaev has returned to his previous post in Mary. He declined to say if this decision was taken by the state or the Muslim community, or what the reasons for the latest transfer were. (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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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