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TURKMENISTAN: Literature import controls lifted for Orthodox - but not for others

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

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has noted that Turkmen government controls on importing religious material for use in their parishes in Turkmenistan have been lifted, yet confiscation of religious literature from residents returning to the country continues, members of a variety of faiths told Forum 18 News Service. Although isolated instances of confiscations of such literature on leaving Turkmenistan have also occurred earlier, this has stepped up in recent months. Patriarch Kirill also said discussions with the Foreign Ministry are underway over building a new Orthodox cathedral in Ashgabad. Planned in the 1990s, it was never built and the site was later used for another building. Bayram Samuradov, chief architect of Ashgabad, told Forum 18 that a provisional new site has been earmarked for the cathedral. "It is more beautiful and appropriate than the old site, and is located in an area with a large European population," he told Forum 18. He refused to discuss why other faiths cannot build places of worship in Ashgabad. "That's not a question for me."

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has noted that Turkmen government controls on importing religious material for use in the dozen Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan have been lifted. "Until recently, a major problem was the import into the country of church articles and religious literature," he told the Bishops' Council in Moscow on 2 February in a speech published in full on the Patriarchate website. "However, with the help of the Lord, this problem has at present been resolved positively." Members of many other religious communities have complained to Forum 18 News Service of continuing confiscations of religious literature both inside the country and from travellers entering or leaving Turkmenistan.

Religious literature is still routinely confiscated at the border. Tight control of the country's borders includes frequent, often thorough searches for religious literature (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

Any traveller with more than a handful of books is almost certain to have them confiscated, religious believers from Turkmenistan of a variety of faiths have told Forum 18 in early 2011. No more than one copy of any one title is likely to be allowed through, as officials believe any extra copies are for distribution, which is illegal.

Nearly a dozen people Forum 18 has spoken to between November 2010 and the end of February 2011 who passed through Ashgabad [Ashgabat] airport – both Turkmen residents and foreign visitors, even those invited by the Turkmen government – have said that almost the first question customs officers ask is whether they have religious literature with them.

Searches and confiscations are conducted by border guards, customs officers and officers of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. "It's difficult to say which officer is from which agency," one individual who has had religious literature confiscated told Forum 18.

Confiscations on exit too

In what some local religious believers say is a new development, border guards and MSS secret police officers at Ashgabad airport searched the luggage of known religious believers leaving the country in early 2011. A number had religious literature confiscated from them, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. "This is a definite turn for the worse, if we cannot even take religious materials out of the country now," one complained.

Only occasionally in the past have religious believers complained to Forum 18 of confiscation of religious literature on departure from Turkmenistan.

The duty officer at the Border Service headquarters in Ashgabad referred all enquiries on the confiscation of religious literature to the duty officer at the airport. However, each time Forum 18 called on 11 March the telephones were engaged or went unanswered. Telephones at the State Customs Service went unanswered the same day, while the MSS secret police refused to answer any questions.

Also unwilling to answer questions was the government's Gengesh (Committee) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad. The man who on 9 March answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, the Deputy Chair, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began asking questions.

Religious publishing barely exists within Turkmenistan, and the little religious literature that is occasionally published requires prior approval from the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs. Religious literature, audio recordings and DVDs are often confiscated during raids, and possession of such materials can lead to further harassment, as reportedly happened to two Muslim students in Ashgabad in February.

Confiscation of Orthodox books, baptismal crosses and incense at an end?

In his Moscow speech, Patriarch Kirill did not specify what difficulties there had been for the Church to import literature and church objects. However, Russian Orthodox clergy have complained for some years to Forum 18 that importing religious literature, copies of the Church's official Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, baptismal crosses and incense has been restricted or impossible. Russian Orthodox books have been confiscated at customs, along with other Christian, as well as Muslim literature and publications of other faiths.

However, if Russian Orthodox priests can now import religious literature and church objects, it remains unclear if Russian Orthodox laypeople have the same possibility.

Asked whether the Turkmen government's apparent lifting of some controls on Russian Orthodox literature imports would also allow the Church to print literature within Turkmenistan, an official of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations insisted that it does not need to. "There's a large enough number of Orthodox publishers in Russia which produce the quantities of Orthodox literature needed," the official told Forum 18 from Moscow on 9 March. "This can then be shipped to Russian Orthodox parishes around the world."

The small Seventh-day Adventist Church in Turkmenistan have long asked their fellow Adventists around the world to pray for the opening up of the country for religious materials. They noted in February that not only is the import of any literature "including of the Bible" banned, but "this ban also extends to programmes and films of a religious nature".

Among other Adventist prayer requests was for the possibility for fellow Adventists to be able to visit communities in Turkmenistan. They noted in February that this has not been possible for the past two years. The government allowed a handful of such Adventist visits from September 2008, but they stopped soon after (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

Expelled from Institute for Koran recordings?

Two students were reportedly expelled from the National Institute of Sports and Tourism in Ashgabad after Education Ministry inspectors discovered audio recordings of suras (verses) of the Koran on their computers, a blogger who goes by the name voxclamantis_tm declared on the livejournal website on 17 February. Officials justified the expulsions by claiming that the two students were propagating "religious extremism".

The blogger said the two were identified after Education Ministry inspectors made "unexpected inspections" at night in early to mid-February in student accommodation at "several universities" in Ashgabad and "thoroughly inspected personal belongings". "Students say that their mobile phones, personal laptops were examined by specialists who had software to restore deleted content." The blogger notes that "in Turkmenistan there is no such thing as privacy, and these violations are usual things for Turkmen people."

Forum 18 has been unable to confirm the expulsion reports by the blogger, who posts anonymously. However, Ashgabad residents and other sources – such as the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights – have reported extensive state searches of student accommodation in February in the wake of a murder of a student, allegedly by other students.

Aver Handurdiev, Deputy Rector of the National Institute of Sports and Tourism, appeared aware of recent check-ups in student accommodation in Ashgabad. However, he denied absolutely that anyone had searched the property of students of his Institute or that any students had been expelled for having audio recordings of the Koran in their computers. "No such things happened," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 23 February. "No one was excluded for that reason. I guarantee it 100 percent before God."

Will Russian Orthodox be allowed to build cathedral?

Patriarch Kirill also told the Bishops' Council that the head of the Church's Turkmen deanery, Bishop Feofilakt of Smolensk, has been able to discuss with Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov the possibility of building a new cathedral and educational centre in Ashgabad. "At present this is being discussed at a governmental level," Patriarch Kirill said, apparently referring to the Turkmen government.

The authorities have up till now refused to allow the Church to build the new Resurrection Cathedral in Ashgabad, planned in the mid-1990s. The then President Saparmurat Niyazov allocated the Church a five hectare plot of land in the centre of the city, later described by Bishop Vladimir of Tashkent (who had care of the Church in Turkmenistan until 2007) as "one of the most beautiful sites in Ashgabad". The Russian Orthodox Church held a high-profile design competition which was won in September 1996 by the Moscow architect Igor Voskresensky and the cathedral was to be completed by 2000. The cathedral was never built and the allocated plot in central Ashgabad remained vacant for many years (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725). However, the state later built the Ruhnama University on the site.

Bayram Samuradov, chief architect of Ashgabad, told Forum 18 that a provisional site in the Parahat suburb in the south of the city has been earmarked as the new location for the cathedral. "It is more beautiful and appropriate than the old site, and is located in an area with a large European population," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 11 March. He said the Cabinet of Ministers has given provisional approval for the General Plan, which is due to run until 2050, on which the cathedral site is marked.

Samuradov said the land has been allocated by the state, but the Russian Orthodox will pay for construction. He said Voskresensky's plan is still the current plan, but added that he could not say when construction will start.

Ata, an aide to Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov who would not give his surname, insisted that the Foreign Ministry is not involved in the issue of allocating a new site or building the new cathedral. "The Patriarch gets in touch with relevant officials, for example at the Gengesh for Religious Affairs," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 9 March. Asked what progress Meredov and Bishop Feofilakt had achieved in their discussions, Ata admitted that they had held discussions, but responded to Forum 18: "You're not competent to interfere in these issues." He declined to discuss the new cathedral further.

Orthodox priests in Ashgabad referred Forum 18 to Fr Andrei Sapunov, a priest who is also a veteran Deputy Chair of the Gengesh. "He is responsible for the issue of building the new cathedral, as he handles relations between the Orthodox Church and the state," one priest told Forum 18 on 11 March. However, the man who answered Fr Sapunov's phone at the Gengesh the same day told Forum 18 he was not in the office, and declined to answer any other questions.

"Discussions are now underway on [the government] providing a new site for the construction of the cathedral," the official of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations told Forum 18. "We have every reason to believe that by the end of this year, with God's help, this issue will be resolved."

Although the Russian Orthodox Church was one of only two faiths officially allowed to function in Turkmenistan between 1997 and 2003, its life has not been easy. Its parishes applied for the compulsory re-registration in the wake of the 2003 revisions to the Religion Law, but officials deliberately dragged their feet. They gained re-registration only in November 2005. The second parish in the eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) had to wait until January 2006 for registration (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037).

Building new places of worship is almost impossible for other faiths, members of other religious communities have complained to Forum 18. Using other properties for worship is also difficult (see F18 religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

Chief architect Samuradov refused to discuss why other faiths cannot build places of worship in Ashgabad. "That's not a question for me," he told Forum 18.

Meetings against religious minorities

Members of a Protestant church away from Ashgabad have been especially closely monitored since the beginning of the year, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Muslim leaders met in a local mosque to discuss what action to take against the church, with some arguing that action should be taken to halt their activity and others arguing that church members were "true people of God" who should be allowed to continue their activity. No action was taken against the church, but it remains under close scrutiny.

Members of another Protestant church elsewhere in Turkmenistan have faced serious threats since the beginning of the year, including at public meetings, Protestants who likewise asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. However, such threats have died down. (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=1512.

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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