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TURKMENISTAN: You're not going on a summer holiday

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Members of a Baptist Church from northern Turkmenistan had just arrived for a shared summer holiday in Avaza on the Caspian Sea when the local police officer, eight officials in civilian clothes and the imam (who is also the state-appointed religious affairs official) raided their accommodation, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. The officials and imam insulted and threatened the visitors over three days because of their faith and church members had to abandon their holiday. Meanwhile, none of the eight known religious prisoners of conscience (one Protestant and seven Jehovah's Witnesses) is known to have been freed in the presidentially-decreed late August amnesty. Not freed was Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, who has spent a year in custody on what church members say were trumped-up charges to punish him for leading his church. His wife is "so disappointed," one of their friends told Forum 18. "She again sits at home and cries."

About forty members of a religious community from northern Turkmenistan who travelled to the resort of Avaza on the Caspian Sea for an August holiday were detained, questioned and insulted by the police and the local imam because of their faith, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Members of the Path of Faith Baptist Church from Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] were forced to abandon their summer break. The Church has been seeking legal status in vain for six years. Meanwhile, it appears none of the known religious prisoners of conscience – Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev and seven Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors - were freed in the late August prisoner amnesty. "Ilmurad's wife Maya is so disappointed – he has now been imprisoned for a year," one of their friends told Forum 18. "She again sits at home and cries."

Reached at his office in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 5 September, Pirnazar Hudainazarov, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, once again refused to discuss anything with Forum 18.

Asked the same day about the raid and threats in Avaza, the continuing denial of registration to a number of religious communities and the continued imprisonment of religious prisoners of conscience, the Deputy Chair of the same Committee, Murad Atabaev, told Forum 18 that none of these were "in the competence of" parliamentary deputies. "On the question of registration, that is an issue for the Gengesh [Committee] for Religious Affairs and the Justice Ministry. As for the amnesty, that is an issue for the special state commission under the President."

The man who answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, hung up on 5 September as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Atabaev confirmed to Forum 18 that no progress has been made on drafting either a revised Religion Law or a Law on Alternative Service. He claimed that both of them would be considered in 2012, but admitted that no text of either yet exists.

Atabaev also admitted that he had not been given the highly-critical legal review of the current Religion Law by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), completed in June 2010 but not made public until the following December (see F18News 20 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1523).

Told that the legal review is freely available in Russian and English on the OSCE's Legislationline website, Atabaev said he does not have access to the internet. "I'm sure it will be given to me when it is necessary," he told Forum 18.

Imam and police issue religious insults

Members of the Path of Faith Church had arranged for a shared summer holiday in Avaza near Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk]. Soon after they arrived at their accommodation there on the evening of 31 July, the district police officer and eight officials in civilian clothes burst in, Protestants told Forum 18. Accompanying them was the imam of Turkmenbashi, Chary-hajy Mommalyev, who – like all Turkmenistan's imams - is also the city representative of the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs.

"Church members had just arrived, settled the children and had the hot food ready on the table when the officials burst in," Protestants complained to Forum 18. The officials collected the identity documents of the 16 adults and took the church members to

police station No. 2. "Under the guise of registering them, the officers began to question them one by one," Protestants told Forum 18. "They put psychological pressure on them, humiliated them morally and insulted them because of their faith, especially Imam Chary-hajy." They told Forum 18 that the imam accused one female church member of having sexual relations with a man not her husband in what they interpreted as a means to offend and humiliate her.

When church members insisted that the local registration requirement for short visits within Turkmenistan had been abolished and that local registration was therefore not necessary, one official insisted to them that "for security reasons" officials needed to know who was staying in the area.

Although the church members were not arrested, they were held until well after midnight. They were then forced to return to the police station each day for the next three days for questioning. Only then were their identity documents returned. The church members decided it would be safer to abandon the holiday and return home.

The church members did not know how the local officials knew that they had arrived. However, one official told church members that at least one official from Dashoguz travelled to Turkmenbashi to follow them, Protestants told Forum 18.

Forum 18 was unable to find the telephone number of police station No. 2 to find out why members of a religious community cannot take a summer holiday together in Avaza without being threatened and insulted.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Imam Mommalyev to find out why he participated in the raid and reportedly insulted members of a different religious community. His office telephone at the city hyakimlik (administration) and his mobile went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 5 September.

Turkmenbashi's imam took part in a police raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in the city in June 2008, during which the home owner was threatened and mocked for her faith (see F18News 25 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1221).

Some Muslims as well as members of non-Muslim communities have criticised the dual role officially-appointed imams have as state-backed religious leaders and as state officials of the Gengesh, both at local and national level. Local imams have often taken part in raids on non-Muslim communities (see eg. F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

Registration applications in vain?

Path of Faith Church in Dashoguz first lodged its registration application in 2005, but officials repeatedly questioned the content and grammar of the application. At the same time, police and other officials have often raided church services (see F18News 12 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1408).

Most recently the Church lodged its application to the Justice Ministry again in 2008, but two years later the Ministry returned the application, saying it must be submitted first to the Gengesh for its approval. "The Gengesh had already given its approval before the application went to the Ministry," one Protestant familiar with the application told Forum 18.

Similarly, Light to the World Protestant Church in the town of Mary east of Ashgabad – led by the imprisoned Pastor Nurliev – also sought registration in vain. Church members met Justice Ministry officials in January 2007 in what they hoped would be a meeting to remove any outstanding problems. However, officials have repeatedly refused to process the application (see F18News 12 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1408).

The two Protestant churches are among a number of religious communities which have been trying to register in vain for many years. The Religion Law specifies a requirement for a minimum of five adult citizen founders for a religious community to seek registration, though in practice applications by communities the state does not like will not be given registration regardless of the number of founders.

The telephones at the department of the Justice Ministry which is supposed to register religious communities went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 5 September.

Amnesty, but not for religious prisoners of conscience?

As has become customary, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov signed an amnesty decree to free prisoners to mark the Muslim Night of Omnipotence, which this year fell on 26-27 August. The government website claimed on 23 August that in signing the decree the President was "governed by the principles of mercy, love for humanity, justice and humanism".

The government website quoted President Berdimukhamedov on 26 August as telling his Cabinet of Ministers that more than 3,730 prisoners were being freed under the amnesty. However, the lists of freed prisoners were not published in newspapers, so this claim

is impossible to verify.

None of the then nine known religious prisoners of conscience or the additional three serving suspended sentences was freed in the February amnesty for Flag Day (see F18News 9 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1550).

Pastor remains imprisoned

Friends of Pastor Nurliev had again hoped that he might have been included in the August amnesty, but they were again disappointed. However, they told Forum 18 that he has now been treated for his diabetes for the first time since his arrest in August 2010. "He has been treated to reduce the levels of sugar in the blood," one friend told Forum 18. "His wife Maya is of course pleased about this." The friend noted that Maya has been able to visit her husband on the approved visiting days. However, they underlined her continued distress that her husband remains imprisoned on what they insist were trumped-up charges to punish him for his religious activity.

After his arrest in August 2010, Pastor Nurliev was given a four-year labour camp term in October 2010 with "forcible medical treatment" on charges of swindling. In December 2010 he was transferred to the Seydi Labour Camp in the desert in the eastern Lebap Region. The Jehovah's Witness prisoners are also being held in the same camp and the number of known religious prisoners imprisoned there reached eleven in spring 2011 (see F18News 29 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566).

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

No amnesty for seven Jehovah's Witness prisoners?

It is believed that the August amnesty was not applied either to the Jehovah's Witness prisoners. All of them are conscientious objectors punished under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment (see F18News 29 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566).

Seven Jehovah's Witnesses are believed to be still serving labour camp sentences handed down under Article 219, Part 1. They are: Navruz Nasyrlyayev, two years, Dashoguz Court, December 2009; Aziz Roziev, 18 months, Seydi Court, August 2010; Dovleyet Byashimov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, August 2010; Ahmet Hodaybergenov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, September 2010; Sunet Japbarov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, December 2010; Matkarim Aminov, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, December 2010; and Dovran Matyakubov, 18 months, Boldumsaz Court, December 2010.

The labour camp sentences of four other Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced under Article 219, Part 1 expired this year. Akkurat Egendurdiev was freed from the Seydi labour camp on 29 January on completion of his 18-month sentence. Sakhmetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, who are brothers, were freed from Seydi on 21 May on completion of their two-year sentences, Jehovah's Witnesses confirmed to Forum 18. They also confirmed that Shadurdi Ushotov was freed from Seydi on 13 July on completion of his two year sentence.

One suspended sentence

One other Jehovah's Witness is still believed to be serving a suspended sentence under Article 219 Part 1: Denis Petrenko, given a two year suspended sentence in Ashgabad in April 2010. This required him to live under some restrictions at home and report regularly to the authorities (see F18News 29 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566).

The two-year suspended sentences of two other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors from Dashoguz, Zafar Abdullaev and Dovran Kushmanov, expired in April (see F18News 29 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566).

Will school insults resume?

With schools having started the new academic year on 1 September, parents belonging to religious minorities are hoping incidents of harassment of their children will not resume. Forum 18 has learned that although isolated, such incidents have occurred in recent years in a number of regions, mainly in rural areas, and seem to be initiated by school heads.

In one rural school in Lebap Region earlier in 2011, Protestant parents were disturbed that the school authorities put up the pictures of several of their children on what the parents describe as a "wall of shame". "Teachers mocked the children because of their faith and encouraged other children to harass them," one Protestant familiar with the incident told Forum 18. "They also would not give them A [excellent] grades. While the children's parents were angry at the teachers and the schools, the children seemed to shrug it off." (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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