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TURKMENISTAN: "Who can forbid us from praying?" Yet raids, fines continue

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Narmurad Mominov, a Protestant leader from Galkynysh in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan, was fined two weeks' average local wages in late February after police raided a private home, local Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. Many of those present were held until the early hours of the morning, while some were pressured to renounce or change their faith. One who did so was told to "repent" publicly in the mosque. During a search, police had found a copy of the New Testament and blamed Mominov for giving it to the home owner. Local Protestants had feared that he could have been given as much as a 15-day jail term. In March 2014, a court in the same Region handed down 15-day prison terms to ten Jehovah's Witnesses to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion. One Baptist home owner in Mary told police intruders who seized four hymnbooks from her guests: "Who can forbid us from praying? Who can forbid us from inviting others as guests?"

On 27 February, a Protestant leader from Galkynysh in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan was fined after a police raid on a private home, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. He was fined two weeks' average wages for a farmer in the area, though church members had feared he could be given as much as a 15-day jail term.

In March 2014, a court in the same Region handed down 15-day prison terms to ten Jehovah's Witnesses to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see below).

Administrative punishments are usually handed down under Article 76, Part 1 of the Administrative Code. Raids are also often accompanied by seizures of religious literature, threats and, on occasion, pressure on individuals to renounce or change their religious faith, sometimes publicly. During one raid, a home owner told police: "Who can forbid us from praying?" (see below).

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 11 March.

Punishments for exercising freedom of religion or belief

Article 76, Part 1 of the Administrative Code – which came into force on 1 January 2014 - punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducted religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance" with a fine on individuals of 1 to 2 base units, on officials of 2 to 5 base units and on legal organisations of 5 to 10 base units. Each base unit is 100 Manats (235 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros or 30 US Dollars).

Second "offences" within one year carry fines of up to 1,000 Manats and, for organisations, an additional ban of up to six months (see F18News 20 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1911).

Religious literature is under tight state censorship. The Gengesh must approve any religious literature before it is used. Gengesh officials stamp copies of books they have approved. Literature without such a stamp is liable to confiscation and individuals can be subject to punishment (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Among other administrative punishments, Administrative Code Article 76, Part 5 punishes "carrying out by a religious organisation of activity not envisaged by its statute, as well as violating the procedure established in law for instructing children in religious belief" with a fine on officials of up to 4 base units (400 Manats) and on legal organisations of up to 10 base units (1,000 Manats).

This means that a religious community which conducts any activity not specifically listed in its statute could be fined up to 1,000 Manats.

Administrative Code Article 77, Part 1 punishes "refusal to register a religious organisation as well as leadership of the activity of

liquidated religious organisations as well as religious organisations whose activity has been halted" with fines of 5 to 10 base units (500 to 1,000 Manats).

Religious communities that are able to register often face demands to collaborate with or provide information to the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Even registered religious communities which do not have their own place of worship can be banned from meeting publicly and their members arrested, fined, tortured and jailed (see eg. F18News 21 May 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2063).

Police raid, search

Trouble began for Narmurad Mominov, a Protestant leader from Galkynysh in Lebap Region, when he was visiting a local family of church members. The family was holding a festive meal to welcome back a child who was studying away from home and had returned for the holidays. Mominov was just leaving when police arrived.

"Despite the fact that they were leaving, officers forced them to stay and write statements that they were conducting a religious meeting, which wasn't true and no religious books were there," Protestants told Forum 18. "Then they decided to search the other rooms and found an Injil [New Testament]." Officers wanted the home owner to say where he had got the New Testament.

Others present in the home – some with children as young as two years old – were held until 2 am the following morning. Later that day they were again summoned and pressured to write statements to abandon their faith and not to attend religious meetings, but most refused to do so. After threatening them, officials let them leave, Protestants told Forum 18.

Officers decided to bring cases against both Mominov and the home owner under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1. They originally set Mominov's court date for 18 February, but the hearing was then postponed. On 27 February, a court fined him 100 Manats. Local Protestants feared he could be fined much more or given a prison term of up to 15 days. So far the home owner has not been brought to trial.

Mominov has a wife and five children to support.

One of the police officers involved in the raid, who would not give his name, refused absolutely to discuss why the private home was raided, why religious literature was confiscated, why individuals were pressured to abandon or change their faith and why Mominov was fined. "Who are you?" the officer asked Forum 18 on 12 March, before putting the phone down. His phone was subsequently switched off.

"Fourth or fifth time they've done this"

Mominov has earlier been fined for his religious activity. Pressure was also earlier put on his parents (who are not church members) to remove him, his wife and children from the family home. One winter, electricity, gas and water were cut off in a bid to pressure the parents to do so.

"This is already the fourth or fifth time they've done this," Protestants complained. "Each time someone says someone has given them an Injil, they prepare a record of an offence, summon them to court and fine them. They also fine anyone attending a religious meeting as they regard meeting for worship in a private home as an offence. You can only meet in a rented venue when the authorities know about it and at approved days and times."

Fines can sometimes be as high as 1,000 Manats, Protestants complained. The average monthly wage for collective farm workers in this part of Turkmenistan is about 200 Manats. "They insist that any fine is paid immediately," Protestants told Forum 18. "Otherwise they will confiscate personal items to pay it off. In the meantime, they will confiscate the fined person's passport to prevent them moving around until the fine is paid." On one occasion, a fined Protestant had to pay the fine within three days of the court decision.

"Repenting" in the mosque

As well as fines, officials often force individuals they have caught to renounce their faith in writing, to say they will no longer speak to others about Christianity, attend worship meetings or even meet other church members.

On this occasion in Galkynysh, one former church member signed such a renunciation. Officials then forced him to go to the mosque to declare publicly that he had repented and that he had been deceived when he became a Christian, Protestants told Forum 18.

After doing so officials told the former church member that he would not be taken to court or punished. However, they warned him

that if he ever attended another church meeting or met church members "it would be a different conversation". They also warned him that he would be under surveillance, so officials would know if he did so.

2014 short-term imprisonments

While Mominov was not given a short-term imprisonment as fellow Protestants had feared, other individuals are known to have been given such administrative prison terms to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The known case from 2014 involved a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in and around Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjew) in the eastern Lebap Region.

On 11 March 2014, police in Turkmenabad detained 14 Jehovah's Witnesses and took them to the local hyakimlik (administration), Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Seven were released, but the other seven were placed in a cold chamber of the building under the guard of five police officers until the next evening.

Early on 12 March 2014, police arrested and brought to Serdarabad police station five other Jehovah's Witnesses. That evening, all 12 were brought to Serdarabad District Court. There a Judge sentenced ten of them to 15-day prison terms and fined the other two 100 Manats each. The accused were not told of the charges on which they were convicted nor did they receive any written court decisions. The Supreme Court eventually dismissed their appeals.

2014 raids and fines

A series of religious communities and individuals faced detentions, fines, raids and religious literature confiscations in 2014. The known such incidents have affected Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants.

On 6 January 2014, police found Annaberdy Nunnayev and another Jehovah's Witness on an Ashgabad street and brought them to a police station. Shortly afterwards, a court found them guilty under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 for conducting religious activity and fined each of them 720 Manats.

In Dashoguz on 21 February 2014, five officers of the Police Serious and Organised Crime Department raided the home of Zulfiya Ametova. "The officers acted harshly towards the residents, including Ametova's elderly parents," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Following the unauthorised search, Ametova and her elderly mother were taken to the local hyakimlik and pressured to sign statements against their will. Their appeal, filed on 4 April 2014 with Dashoguz City Prosecutor's Office, is pending.

On 27 March 2014, ten police officers raided the Ashgabad home of Jehovah's Witness Ogulbostan Amannazarova. They filmed her home and those present. They arrested everyone in attendance, and took them to the police station. Amannazarova was fined 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 for holding a gathering at her home with her fellow believers.

On 4 April 2014, authorities "unlawfully" searched the Ashgabad home of Juma and Maral Nazarov. Nazarov was "violently deprived" of his mobile phone when he attempted to record the incident, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. On finding personal copies of Jehovah's Witness literature, the officers took Juma and Marala Nazarov to the police station and pressured them to sign self-incriminating statements, threatening them with a 15-day prison term. Later they were fined 200 Manats. Their appeal of 6 June 2014, addressed to the Chair of Ashgabad's Bagtyyarlyk District is pending.

On 12 April 2014, ten police officers forced their way into the Ashgabad flat of Jehovah's Witness couple Gelman and Svetlana Rahmetulov without identifying themselves and conducted an illegal search. Officers seized their personal religious literature and their computer. Gelman Rahmetulov was taken to the police station. He was found guilty under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 and fined 200 Manats.

In Turkmenabad on 21 June 2014, Jehovah's Witness Gulzara Gladkova was having a meeting with guests when authorities forced their way into her apartment by opening the bolt of her door with a metal hook. They photographed everyone present and seized a guest's computer.

Police raided a Sunday service of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Mary in summer 2014, fellow Baptists told Forum 18. Two church members faced administrative cases under Article 76, Part 1. Each was fined 100 Manats. "This was the only such incident on our congregations during 2014 and none has been raided this year," one Council of Churches Baptist told Forum 18.

Did police encourage denunciation?

On 29 April 2014, two police officers and three officials raided the home of a female Baptist church member in Mary, fellow Protestants told Forum 18. They apparently arrived after a denunciation from a neighbour with police encouragement.

The officers and officials accused the home owner of gathering with other female friends in a "sect". She told them that her friends

come every week to visit and encourage her elderly, housebound grandmother. "We talk, drink tea, pray together and sing Christian songs," the home owner told the intruders. "Who can forbid us from praying? Who can forbid us from inviting others as guests?"

The police wrote out statements by hand and tried to pressure the elderly women present to sign them. When the home owner wrote a statement saying that officers were pressuring the women to sign statements they had not written, the officers insisted they were not. The home owner then tore up the statements. Officers confiscated the four hymnbooks the women had been using. "I told them that without approval from a prosecutor they didn't have the right to confiscate them, but they wouldn't listen," the home owner noted. "We explained that Turkmenistan's Constitution allows us to believe and to meet, and speaks of freedom of religious profession, but they asked us to show us such a law, as if it didn't exist."

The following day the church's leader went to the head of the Regional Gengesh for Religious Affairs – who, like all the Regional Gengesh heads, has a double job as the Regional Imam – to try to get back the confiscated books. The Gengesh head invited in two colleagues, who did not identify themselves. He then started treating the church leader "as a guilty party", questioning him about where the church meets and insisting that holding religious meetings in private homes is illegal.

Taxi driver – and wife - punished

A Protestant who drives a taxi in the northern city of Dashoguz was fined 200 Manats in autumn 2014 for talking about his faith to customers, Protestants told Forum 18. His car was also confiscated. Trouble began after a customer reported him to the MSS secret police in spring 2014. MSS officers used the traffic police to summon him, but the MSS conducted the interrogation. During interrogation, the taxi driver identified another church member, Hemra Annayev.

MSS secret police, police and hyakimlik officials then raided Annayev's home. They searched it without a warrant, seizing his personal Christian books.

Annayev and another church member who was visiting him were taken to Niyazov District hyakimlik, where they were accused of being Christians. Officials later prepared an administrative case against Annayev and the other church member, but did not explain what he was guilty of, Protestants complained to Forum 18. Both were then fined 200 Manats each, although no written verdict was handed to either.

The other church member was reportedly beaten and pressured to work for the MSS secret police.

In late 2014, about two months after the fines, the authorities began investigating Annayev's wife at her place of work. They claim to have found some "irregularities", fined her 12,000 Manats and dismissed her from her job. (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=1676.

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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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