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TURKMENISTAN: Secret police break up Muslim commemoration of dead Azeri president

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Turkmen secret police have raided a mosque to break up a Shia Muslim commemoration for the dead former Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliiev. Forum 18 notes that the government has de facto banned Shia Islamic practice, although some Shias continue to practise their faith in defiance of the authorities.

Secret police officers raided a Shia Muslim mosque in the Caspian port city of TÄ½rkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) on 21 December to break up a commemoration for former Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliyev, the Moscow-based Memorial human rights centre reported on 20 January, quoting sources within Turkmenistan who preferred to remain unnamed. The hundreds of Muslims, who were from Turkmenistan's ethnic Azeri minority, had gathered at the mosque at lunchtime intending to share the sadak, the traditional prayers and communal meal led by the imam, to mark seven days after the death of Aliyev, who died in the United States on 12 December.

Officers of the National Security Ministry, led by the city chief Muradov, arrived at the Shia mosque at about 3pm, Memorial reported. Muradov ordered the Muslims to disperse to their homes, threatening that force would be used. When those present refused to disperse, police units arrived. The mosque's imam, fearing violence from the authorities, begged the Muslims to fulfil the secret police orders.

Memorial quoted one participant as declaring that the Muslims had spent days collecting money and buying the necessary food for the meal. "He said that no-one had expected that the authorities would not allow them to hold the sadak to commemorate Aliyev's passing." Memorial added that in the wake of the raid on and dispersal of the commemoration, more and more local Azerbaijanis are deciding to leave Turkmenistan, believing they are regarded as "unwelcome guests".

Forum 18 notes that Shia Muslims, who are mainly from Turkmenistan's Azeri and Iranian minorities living in the west of the country, are traditionally more devout than ethnic Turkmens. The government has de facto banned Shia Islamic practice. Shia mosques failed to gain re-registration during the compulsory round of re-registration in 1997 after the adoption of the much harsher law on religion and this policy has remained unchanged. However, some Shias continue to practise their faith in defiance of the authorities.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

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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