

30 July 2018

TURKMENISTAN: Three more conscientious objectors jailed

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

Three Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in July for one year each for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. They are among at least five conscientious objectors jailed so far in 2018, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. Prosecutor's Offices are still investigating others.

Three more Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were jailed in July to punish them for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Each received a one year term in an ordinary regime labour camp.

Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev and Maksat Jumadurdiyev are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at Seydi Labour Camp, where three other Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are already being held (see below).

Their jailing brings to at least five the number of conscientious objectors jailed in Turkmenistan for refusing military service. The other two imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors - Arslan Begenchov and Kerven Kakabayev, both in Seydi Labour Camp - were jailed in January for one year each. Another Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience, Bahram Hemdemov, is also imprisoned (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that, despite repeated prisoner amnesties (including in March and June 2018) that have seen even murderers freed, Begenchov, Kakabayev and Hemdemov have not been freed under amnesty.

Prosecutor's Offices are also investigating other Jehovah's Witness young men who have refused to perform military service on grounds of religious conscience, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Forum 18 tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament. Her assistant – who did not give his name - told Forum 18 on 27 July that she was on a work trip and would be back at her desk on 30 July. However, each time Forum 18 called on 30 July her phone went unanswered.

Many Muslim prisoners of conscience

In addition to the six known Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, dozens of Muslims have been jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief. In many cases, relatives do not know if they are alive or dead (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

On 11 July, the Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] upheld the 12-year jail terms handed down in Balkan Region in August 2017 to punish five Muslims who met with others to study their faith using the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.

Four of the five are believed to be in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect (see F18News 27 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399).

No conscientious objection, no alternative service

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defence as a "sacred duty" of everyone and states that military service is compulsory for men. Turkmenistan ignored the recommendation of a July 2016 legal review of the draft Constitution by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe that it should include a provision for alternative, civilian service (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of religious conscience face prosecution 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 or two years' corrective labour.

In March 2017, at the end of its review of Turkmenistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee again called on the authorities to end punishments for those unable to perform military service on grounds of conscience and introduce an alternative, civilian service (CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2).

"The State party should revise its legislation without undue delay with a view to clearly recognizing the right to conscientious objection to military service," the Committee declared, "provide for alternative service of a civilian nature outside the military sphere and not under military command for conscientious objectors, and halt all prosecutions of individuals who refuse to perform military service on grounds of conscience and release those who are currently serving prison sentences."

Officials refused to explain to Forum 18 why they did not implement the UN recommendation. With the two jailings in January 2018, less than a year after the UN report was issued, Turkmenistan began imprisoning conscientious objectors again after a break of four years (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Dashoguz Region: One-year sentence

On 11 July, Gurbansoltan eje District Court in the northern Dashoguz Region convicted 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness Ikhlosbek Rozmetov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp.

Rozmetov appealed against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court. However, it is not known if the appeal has yet been heard. Telephones at the court were inaccessible when Forum 18 tried to call on 30 July.

Rozmetov is currently being held in Dashoguz Regional Investigation Prison, DZ-D/7. If the Regional Court rejects his appeal, he will be sent to serve his sentence in an ordinary regime labour camp.

Lebap Region: Two one-year sentences

On 6 July, officers in Danew District in the eastern Lebap Region took 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness Veniamin Genjiyev into pre-trial detention, claiming that he had failed to appear at the Prosecutor's Office, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. However, neither Genjiyev nor his parents ever received an official summons to appear at the Prosecutor's Office and Genjiyev never signed any document limiting his movement. He challenged the pre-trial detention order.

On 17 July, Danew District Court convicted Genjiyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp. Genjiyev decided not to appeal against his conviction.

Also on 17 July, the same Danew District Court convicted 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness Maksat Jumadurdiyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp. Jumadurdiyev decided not to appeal against his conviction.

Both Genjiyev and Jumadurdiyev are being held in Lebap Regional Investigation Prison in the regional capital Turkmenabad, LB-D/9. As neither chose to appeal against their convictions they are expected to be transferred soon to an ordinary regime labour camp to serve their sentences.

Imminent transfer to Seydi Labour Camp?

Rozmetov, Genjiyev and Jumadurdiyev are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at the ordinary regime labour camp LB-K/12 in the desert near Seydi, in Lebap Region. Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp.

The other two imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors - Arslan Begenchov and Kerven Kakabayev – were sent there after their January convictions (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Also held at Seydi Labour Camp is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov. He was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat

Seydi

uchr. LB-K/12

Turkmenistan

(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=2244.

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.

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