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TURKMENISTAN: Religious persecution continues

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

There is no slackening of religious persecution in Turkmenistan. In the last two months the authorities have, amongst other things, fired a Jehovah's Witness from his job, forced a Hindu to sign a statement renouncing his beliefs, raided religious meetings, confiscated the personal property of Baptists, fined Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses large sums of money, and the police have sexually harassed one female Jehovah's Witness. She has complained to the OSCE office in Ashgabat about the police assault on her.

Aleksandr Zorin, a Jehovah's Witness, has told Forum 18 News Service from Ashgabat of how he was summoned to the Gengeshi (the state body controlling religious affairs) on 10 March to be interviewed by seven persons, one of them a mullah. During a heated discussion, Zorin was pressured to abandon his "disgraceful religion," otherwise the Gengeshi would contact his work place and get him dismissed. This actually took place the following day. In the evening of 12 March, Zorin was informed about his dismissal from work. He learned that the Gengeshi had written to his workplace, describing him as a "terrible man and a sectarian". Because of Zorin the whole team that he was working with faced dismissal, so he had no choice but to agree to his dismissal.

Zorin said he was the first Jehovah's Witness to his knowledge to have been sacked this year, although "many" he knew had been sacked from their jobs in earlier years. He told Forum 18 on 7 May he had now found work again privately to help support his wife and six-month-old baby. He said he was warned on 10 March that if he continues his religious activity he will be fined.

Meanwhile, raids on religious meetings are continuing. The exile human rights group Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported that on 12 April police confiscated the belongings of members of a Baptist church in Ashgabat for conducting an "unauthorised" service in a private apartment. The belongings of one Baptist family, including personal items, were confiscated and officials threatened to confiscate the property of all those present. Many members of this community were fined five times the minimum monthly wage.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that their communities "are still subjected to severe persecution and discrimination at the hands of the authorities", and say the situation has not improved. "Turkmen Jehovah's Witnesses are completely deprived of freedom of association and peaceful assembly, even in their own homes," they report. "Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, the new religion law outlaws any religious activity without state registration, and there is no guarantee that the registration application would not be used as a tool of repression and persecution as was the practice in the past."

The Jehovah's Witnesses also report that on 9 March, Olga Fedorina was assaulted by police in Ashgabat. At 12.30 p.m. one policeman in uniform and two policemen in civilian clothes knocked at her door. Her husband refused to open, but the police kept knocking for 20 minutes, demanding that the door be opened for the district police officer. At 1:00 p.m. Fedorina went out in order to pick up her youngest daughter from kindergarten, but outside a plain-clothes policeman stopped her, demanded her passport, and called the other policemen by radio. Then the police burst into the apartment and confiscated all her religious literature: one Bible, six books, and a few magazines. These were all personal, signed copies—a gift from a friend abroad. Fedorina was taken to the police station and forced to write an explanatory statement dictated by the police. Additionally, the district police officer harassed her sexually. Afterward, Fedorina filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office, also giving the OSCE office in Ashgabat a copy of her complaint.

On 18 March, at 5.30 p.m. two people came to Suren Gasparyan's apartment representing themselves as coming from Ashgabat's Niyazov District Court. They required that Gasparyan immediately pay a fine of 250,000 manats (about 344 Norwegian Kroner, 42 Euros, or 50 US Dollars), that he had allegedly left unpaid in 2001. Average salaries are under 30 US Dollars (205 Norwegian Kroner or 25 Euros) a month. Gasparyan explained that he had paid all fines as required. From 2000 to 2004 he was arrested some 8 to 10 times and paid a total of approximately 200 US Dollars (1,370 Norwegian Kroner or 169 Euros) in fines imposed simply because he engaged in his religious activity. Nevertheless, the representatives of the court swore at him and said that they had an order from the city administration stating that Gasparyan must pay this fine. They said that if he did not pay it, his property would be confiscated. Gasparyan had no choice but to borrow money to pay the fine to the court representatives.

The Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported that on 25 April, officers of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police, representatives of the city khyakimlik (administration) for religious affairs and ordinary police officers raided a meeting held by

Krishna members in a private home in a district of Mary in southern Turkmenistan. After the group was questioned for three hours, an NSM secret policeman threatened the Krishna devotees with fines, being dismissed from their work, and criminal charges. The Krishna devotees were then allowed to go home.

"Hare Krishna devotees are systematically facing raids to private homes led by MNS officers for searches, illegal confiscation of spiritual literature, slanderous propaganda, directed against Hinduism, insults, forcible deportation from the country, direct threats and arbitrary fines," one unnamed devotee told Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative. "Propaganda in society among the local population is aimed at insulting Krishna devotees publicly and making a mockery of our appearance and our activities, which often affects our children who are afraid to demonstrate openly their devotion to the faith for the fear of being bullied by other children."

Sergey Ageyev, who is 23 and a new convert to Hinduism, has reported that police officers insulted him and required him to sign a statement that he never had, does not have and will not have anything to do with this religious group in future. Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported that they threatened him with physical violence, criminal punishment and said that there was a specific way to deal with "people like you" in prison.

Other religious communities have told Forum 18 they continue to function "in the underground". "Any meetings take place secretly for fear of visits from secret police agents," one Protestant told Forum 18 in early May. "For some years we haven't been able to meet together, we can't get literature and can't preach openly. There have been fines and literature confiscations. The situation has not improved today."

Aleksandr Zorin said that, for the Jehovah's Witnesses, the situation is no better. "It is impossible for more than four people to meet at one time," he told Forum 18. "How they find out how many are meeting we don't know, but they do." He insisted that the community wishes to get state registration. "If it had been possible we would already have done it."

The continued attacks on religious believers make many believe that the authorities have no intention of changing the ongoing reality of continuing persecution and de facto and de jure criminalisation of religious belief.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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