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TURKMENISTAN: Finding Nemo, hunting Adventists

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Just three days after a Baptist service in a private home was raided in Abadan, across the country in Turkmenabad [Chärjew] police raided an Adventist home on 7 August. The family's children and guests were watching a video of Finding Nemo, but police confiscated all the literature they could find, confiscated the owners' identity documents and pressured the husband to sign a statement that an "illegal" religious service was underway. The Adventist pastor in the capital Ashgabad has complained that his congregation cannot hold public worship as it cannot rent premises for worship, despite having state registration. "All hall managers turn us down as soon as they learn that we are looking for premises for a Church," Pastor Pavel Fedotov told Forum 18 News Service. "Even though we have registration we can't do anything."

Nine children were watching a video of the animated film Finding Nemo when police raided the home of an Adventist family in the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Chärjew] on 7 August. "Without showing any warrant they immediately began confiscating all the literature they could find," a Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service. Police then put pressure on the owners to admit an "illegal" religious service was underway. Meanwhile in the capital Ashgabad, the Adventists – who once again have state registration as a religious community – cannot rent premises for services to replace their church, demolished by the authorities in November 1999. "Although we have official registration, we see no real change so far," the church's pastor Pavel Fedotov told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 10 August. "We cannot hold public worship as we cannot find anywhere to hold it."

The raid in Turkmenabad came three days after a raid on a Baptist home in Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near Ashgabad, where a prayer and Bible reading service was underway (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390). Like the Adventists, the Baptists also once again have state registration, but this did not protect them from the raid and a warning never to meet again.

Yet the Adventist family in Turkmenabad were simply relaxing at home when the police raided their home. "The family's five children were there together with children of the neighbours, and the mother was in the kitchen preparing supper," the Protestant told Forum 18. "No service was underway at that time." As well as all books, compact discs were also seized. The police took the owners of the flat to the police station, where they forced them to write statements and confiscated their identity documents (internal passports). Neither the identity documents nor the confiscated books and compact discs have yet been returned.

Police pressured the husband to sign a statement that an "illegal" religious service was in progress when the police arrived. He showed them a copy of the Adventists' registration documents, which show that the Church has registered status in the whole of the country.

Since the Church received registration again on 1 June for the first time since 1997, the Ashgabad congregation has sought somewhere to meet in vain. "All hall managers turn us down as soon as they learn that we are looking for premises for a Church," Pastor Fedotov told Forum 18. "We appealed to the authorities to help us find premises to rent but they refused. The hyakimlik [local administration] refused to talk to us, declaring that all communication should be through the government's Gengeshi [Council] for religious affairs."

Forum 18 tried to contact officials at the Gengeshi on 11 August to find out why religious communities – even those with registration – cannot rent public buildings for religious services, but all the telephones went unanswered. No official of the registration department of the Justice Ministry was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 11 August.

"Even though we have registration we can't do anything," Pastor Fedotov told Forum 18. "We have got the impression that no officials consider us to be an independent legal entity."

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan 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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