FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

22 November 2004

TURKMENISTAN: Why did Turkmenistan lie to the UN?

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

In a failed bid to head off a United Nations (UN) resolution, sponsored by the European Union and the USA, and supported by Brazil, expressing grave concern at Turkmenistan's human rights record, Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov has falsely claimed that there were "no cases of arrest or conviction on political grounds or for religious beliefs". Three religious prisoners are known to Forum 18 News Service to be held, and arrests continue to be made. On the day of the debate he claimed that there was "no truth to the allegations of limits on the rights to belief, conscience or religion," despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and the UN's two previous resolutions critical of the country's human rights record. Turkmen officials and President Niyazov have a record of making such false claims, but the country's diplomats have refused to discuss the issue of false claims with Forum 18. Countries speaking in support of Turkmenistan in the debate were Algeria, Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Singapore, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan and Venezuela.

In their unsuccessful attempts to head off a critical resolution at the United Nations, senior Turkmen officials have lied about the state of religious freedom in Turkmenistan. Speaking to the Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural) of the UN General Assembly on 9 November, Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov claimed that there were "no cases of arrest or conviction on political grounds or for religious beliefs". Three religious prisoners are known to Forum 18 News Service to be held, and arrests continue to be made. On the day of the debate and adoption of the resolution, 18 November, the Turkmen representative went even further, claiming that there was "no truth to the allegations of limits on the rights to belief, conscience or religion".

The resolution called on the General Assembly to "express its grave concern at the continuing and serious human rights violations occurring in Turkmenistan, in particular the persistence of a governmental policy based on the repression of all political opposition activities, the continuing abuse of the legal system through arbitrary detentions and imprisonment of persons who try to exercise their freedoms of expression, assembly and association and continued restrictions on the exercise of the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion and belief." It also called for "the Government of Turkmenistan to work closely with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with regard to the areas of concern and to release immediately all prisoners of conscience," as well as "to remove remaining restrictions on the activities of public associations, including non-governmental organizations and in particular human rights organizations."

Those countries speaking in the debate in favour of adopting the resolution were the Netherlands, speaking on behalf of the entire European Union and its other sponsor, the USA, and Brazil. The Netherlands noted that the resolution was motivated purely by concerns about the human rights situation on the ground, stating that "improvements on paper and good intentions alone do not suffice" and that two previously adopted Third Committee resolutions should be implemented by Turkmenistan (see F18News 4 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=204). Brazil expected that the draft "would contribute to greater progress to the promotion and protection of human rights in Turkmenistan" and "hoped the draft would serve as an incentive for further progress."

The countries who spoke supporting the Turkmen government were Pakistan, Iran, China, Burma, Uzbekistan, North Korea, Cuba, Sudan, Syria, Algeria, Venezuela, and Belarus, whose representatives made a variety of statements decrying what they said was the "politicization of the United Nations human rights mechanism" and "the senselessness of these types of selective processes" and calling for what they described as "dialogue," and "a cooperative approach and with objectivity and impartiality." Singapore joined those condemning the resolution, and, with specific reference to the illegal in international law jailing of Jehovah's Witnesses, said that "national defence" was "a sovereign right and where individual needs ran counter, the rights of the State must prevail."

Despite Foreign Minister Meredov's protests that the draft resolution was "biased" and "did not correspond to reality", the committee adopted it on 18 November with 65 votes in favour, 49 against and with 56 abstentions.

The three known religious prisoners are the former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, as well as two Jehovah's Witnesses, Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov. Nasrullah is serving a 22-year sentence handed down by a court in the capital Ashgabad in March. Both the Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in May and sentenced to a year and a half in prison, and are being held in labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi. Despite a recent prisoner amnesty coinciding with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, none of the three was freed (see F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2004 - Page 1/2

In his 18 November speech to the committee, the representative claimed that there had been "positive developments in the human rights situation" in Turkmenistan, and added that "laws had been adopted, and measures introduced, to register and ensure the work of religious organisations". He claimed (wrongly) that his country had continued to work with the United Nations and its specialised agencies, as well as other agencies working in the humanitarian sphere. Turkmenistan has failed to respond to repeated communications from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and to requests to visit the country to study the religious freedom situation at first hand (see F18News 26 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=439).

False claims about its human rights record have been made by Turkmenistan in the past. For example, in 2003 President Niyazov falsely claimed that his country had never held religious prisoners of conscience and that it cooperates fully with international bodies on human rights.(see F18News 24 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=194). Questioned by Forum 18 News Service, the Secretary to the Ambassador of the Permanent Delegation of Turkmenistan to the United Nations refused to discuss the issue, claiming, after taking 3 minutes to consult colleagues, that there was no diplomat available.

Although Turkmenistan did amend its religion law earlier this year to reduce the number of adult citizens needed to register a religious community with the Adalat (Justice) Ministry, this has not made any real practical change in the state of religious freedom, as religious communities mostly cannot gain registration and unregistered religious activity is still de facto criminalised – which is against international law. Only Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities can register freely. This year the ministry allowed the Baha'i, Adventist and Hare Krishna communities to register, and is currently completing registration of the Baptist Church (it still awaits the official seal it needs to conduct any official business). However, despite having registration the Adventist Church is banned from meeting for worship (see F18News 4 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=424).

Applications from other religious communities for registration are languishing with no response, while still more communities have decided there is no point in even applying for registration. Among those without registration are Shia mosques, various Evangelical Churches, including Pentecostals and Greater Grace, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church. Jews and Armenian Apostolic Christians have been unable to resume their religious activity (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390). (END)

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

---

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2004