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TURKMENISTAN: Will registration end harassment of religious communities?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Amid continuing international pressure, five Protestant Churches are being granted registration, though no Armenian Apostolic, Lutheran, Jewish, Yezidi or Jehovah's Witness activity is yet allowed (all unregistered religious activity remains illegal). Pastor Viktor Makrousov of the Full Gospel Church told Forum 18 News Service he still has to go to 20 offices to complete the registration process. He will work to regain his confiscated church. He hopes harassment – such as threats to Pentecostals in early April – will come to an end. Meanwhile all four imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were freed by presidential decree in mid-April, but not former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, serving a 22-year sentence.

More than ten months after first applying for state registration, the Greater Grace Church in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] is among five religious communities that have nearly completed the registration process, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Church's pastor Vladimir Tolmachev told Forum 18 on 22 April that his church still had to get a registration number from the state registry and inform the Interior Ministry's sixth department (which handles religious affairs, terrorism and drug crime) of his church's legal status "so that they won't have complaints against us". Then, he hopes, the church will be able to start renting a hall to hold legal worship services for the first time in more than eight years.

The five newly-approved religious communities - the Church of Christ, the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Ashgabad, Light of the East Pentecostal Church in the northern city of Dashoguz, and the New Apostolic Church in Ashgabad – join four other minority faiths (Baha'is, Baptists, Hare Krishna and Adventists) registered last year. "It was more than six months after the Baptists got registration before they were able to rent premises for services," Pastor Tolmachev told Forum 18. "I hope it will be quicker for us."

Also hoping for improvements for his community is Pastor Viktor Makrousov, who leads the Full Gospel church. "We're happy we've at last got registration," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 22 April. "They suddenly phoned up last Sunday [17 April] and told me to come in urgently as we were getting registration, though just three days earlier when we phoned them they had no progress to report. Perhaps they had an order from above. But we still have to go to about twenty offices to complete the process."

Makrousov said he hopes the church will soon be able to rent premises for worship as soon as the registration process is complete. "Meeting in private flats is cramped, but we've got nowhere else to meet. We'll also get working on trying to regain our Ashgabad church confiscated in 2001." He also hopes that harassment of church members – such as the summoning and threatening of several Pentecostals in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) in early April – will come to an end.

The New Apostolic Church has also confirmed to Forum 18 that its church in Ashgabad is being given registration. In the wake of insistence by officials that religious activity was illegal, the Church chose to abide by the law and officially halted all its religious and communal activity.

However, the activity of registered communities remains restricted, with officials insisting that no religious meetings can be held in private homes. Registered congregations are also pressured to subscribe to the grotesque cult of personality around the country's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, which focuses particularly on the two-volume book the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul) which he claims to have written (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Significantly, all five religious communities to receive registration are Protestant churches, adding to widespread belief that the arbitrary granting of legal status was the result of intense pressure from the international community. The Armenian Apostolic Church has seen no progress so far in registering a community or regaining its historical church in Turkmenbashi. No Jewish, Lutheran, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness or Yezidi community has been registered. No progress appears to be in sight over the hundreds of Muslim communities stripped of registration in the wake of the 1996 amendments to the religion law. (Last year a number of mosques were demolished – see F18News 31 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=501).

When the Catholics tried to lodge their registration application with the Adalat (Justice) Ministry in mid-April, officials refused to

accept the documents as Fr Andrzej Madej, the Polish priest who heads the mission in Ashgabad, was listed as the leader. "Officials told us the leader has to be a local citizen," the Catholic community told Forum 18 on 22 April. "We can only have Fr Andrzej as the leader – that is our rule. We hope the government will be able to accept this."

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that they have not yet applied for registration. Given the continuing ban on unregistered religious activity in Turkmenistan, this means any activity they undertake is illegal. "We are still facing minor problems, but nothing serious of late," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 22 April.

At the same time the Hare Krishna community in Ashgabad – which was given registration last summer – has reportedly been prevented from meeting for worship. Members of a Baptist congregation in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) were fined in March and two families were evicted from their hostels in punishment for meeting for worship, despite being part of a registered church (see F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535).

All four known Jehovah's Witness prisoners - Begench Shakhmuradov, Atamurat Suvkhanov, Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov – were freed during the weekend of 16-17 April in the wake of a surprise presidential decree and are now back at home with their families, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18. The four were all named in the 16 April decree, though significantly the decree did not reveal that all four had been sentenced for rejecting compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience.

Three of the four had been sentenced by Dashoguz court - Masharipov on 28 May 2004, Tuvakov on 3 July 2004 and Suvkhanov on 17 December 2004 - while Shakhmuradov had been sentenced by Azatlyk court in Ashgabad on 10 February 2005 (see F18News 17 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514). All were sentenced under Article 219 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces. Turkmenistan offers no non-combat alternative to those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Their release leaves one known religious prisoner, the 57-year-old former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who was arrested after falling out with President Niyazov and is now serving a 22-year sentence on charges the Turkmen government refuses to make public. There are also believed to be several imams in internal exile.

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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