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CENTRAL ASIA: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan close doors to UN Special Rapporteur

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Officials of neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan have been able to explain to Forum 18 News Service why requests by Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, to visit both countries have gone unmet. Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov told Forum 18 through an aide that he was "too busy" to reply to the question. Jahangir - a Pakistani lawyer who is at the forefront of the struggle for human rights in her own country - has called for a new mechanism to be created to deal with countries where there is serious concern for religious freedom, but which fail to cooperate with her requests to visit them. Although agreeing in principle to a visit, Russia has not set a date for one. Jahangir's next visit is due to be to Azerbaijan from 26 February to 6 March.

In contrast to Azerbaijan - which from 26 February to 6 March is due to host an in situ visit by Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief – officials of neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan have been able to explain to Forum 18 News Service when her requests to inspect the religious freedom situation in their countries will be met. On 24 January, Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov told Forum 18 through an aide that he was "too busy" to respond to the question and no written response from his office reached Forum 18 by the end of the working day in the capital Ashgabad on 25 January. Uzbekistan's foreign ministry was likewise unable to say why no invitation has yet been issued to her.

Jahangir, a Pakistani lawyer who has been the Special Rapporteur since 2004, reports on violations of religious freedom around the world on behalf of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. She raises urgent cases with individual governments of "infringements of or impediments to the exercise of the right to freedom of religion and belief", seeking their responses.

In her 30 September 2005 annual report to the UN General Assembly (A/60/399), she describes in situ visits as a "crucial aspect of the mandate on freedom of religion and belief". She particularly highlights the fact that such visits allow her to meet "all individuals and religious communities that are facing difficulties", especially those that do not have the capacity to provide her office in Geneva with information. She said she was "very concerned" that countries that cooperate with her requests to visit are not necessarily those where there is "serious concern with regard to the situation of freedom of religion or belief". She called for a new mechanism to be created to deal with countries where there is a serious concern but which fail to cooperate with her mandate.

Chary Atahanov, acting head of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry's Department for the United Nations and International Organisations, was unavailable on 24 and 25 January. But Maksat Bekiev, an official of the department who said he has been involved in contacts with the UN, declared that he too did not know why Jahangir's request for an invitation had not been met. "I cannot say when she will be allowed to visit," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 24 January. "But you cannot say she has had no response to her letters – we replied to her in 2004 and 2005. We answer all her letters."

In her September 2005 report to the UN General Assembly, Jahangir reported that she had that year "reminded" the Turkmen government of the 2003 request for permission to visit the country and the Uzbek government of her 2004 request. In response to both her reminders, she reported laconically: "No reply". She expressed concern at both countries' failure to respond (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=685). In the September 2005 report she also noted that the Russian Federation had "delayed the invitation" requested repeatedly by her and her predecessor since 1998.

No official in the Uzbek foreign ministry in the capital Tashkent was able to explain why Jahangir's requests to visit had elicited no response. Ilham Yakubov, head of the ministry's United Nations and International Organisations Department, was unavailable on 25 January. But neither Ramatullah Nurimbetov nor Jahangir Hasanov of the department knew why no response had been given. "Perhaps she had not formally requested a visit," Hasanov speculated to Forum 18 on 25 January.

Other countries that have failed to respond to the Special Rapporteur's requests to visit include North Korea (the request dates back to 1999) and Indonesia.

While Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and North Korea are among countries that have failed to respond to repeated requests from the

Special Rapporteur, an official of the Russian Federation has insisted that his country has responded "in a general manner" to Asma Jahangir. "Our government is ready to host the Special Rapporteur," Yuri Boychenko, senior counsellor at the Russian Federation's mission to the United Nations in Geneva who handles human rights, told Forum 18 on 25 January. "She is not being denied the opportunity to visit, but it is not realistic to expect a visit this year."

Boychenko pointed out that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, is due to visit Russia next month, while the Special Rapporteur on racism is due in the summer and a visit by the Special Rapporteur on torture has been provisionally arranged for the autumn.

"Too many delegations are visiting the Russian Federation," he told Forum 18. "We can't absorb more than two or three such visits each year." He said he believed Jahangir's visit "might take place" next year. Asked why such difficulties arose over arranging a rapporteur's visit, Boychenko responded: "Officials have other things to do."

He could not say why no invitation had been issued earlier to Jahangir or to her predecessor, Abdelfattah Amor, given that the mandate has issued almost yearly reminders of its request since 1998, or why no specific dates have been proposed. Boychenko said the mission had communicated its "general" invitation to Jahangir's office and rejected her characterisation of the invitation as "delayed".

Asked whether Russia is happy for Jahangir to inspect the religious freedom situation on the ground in the country for herself, Boychenko responded: "I don't know if the government is happy or not, but it is prepared to welcome her. Her conclusions will determine whether we are happy or not." He complained that Special Rapporteurs' conclusions and proposals "do not always match a country's realities, real history and the real preoccupations of the government".

Russia is among a number of countries, such as Iran, which have indicated that they are prepared to invite Jahangir, but which fail to follow this up with concrete dates to allow a visit to go ahead. She noted in her September 2005 report that "postponing or delaying an invitation, especially for several years, demonstrates a lack of cooperation and that only invitations with proposed dates for a visit or which are closely followed by proposed dates correspond to the level of cooperation required by the [Human Rights] Commission".

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For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background on Turkmenistan, see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

For more background on Uzbekistan, see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

For an outline of what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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