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TURKMENISTAN: Jailed Krishna devotee's appeal fails, but Jehovah's Witness freed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova has failed in her bid to have her seven-year jail sentence overturned, Forum 18 News Service has learned, and her exact whereabouts remain unknown, as are the exact charges she was jailed on. It is believed within Turkmenistan that her jailing was at the behest of the MSS secret police, to intimidate the Hare Krishna community. However, Forum 18 has learnt that Jehovah's Witness Aga Soyegov, who was confined to a psychiatric hospital after refusing military service last November, has now been released. Forum 18 does not know of any other current cases of religious believers in jail for conscientious objection to military service, but there is no alternative service possibility offered to young men. Meanwhile, the second Russian Orthodox church in the eastern town of Turkmenabad has finally gained state registration, and hence state permission to exist, six years after it applied for registration.

Jailed Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova has failed in her bid to have her seven-year prison sentence overturned, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Her appeal was rejected by a judge at the city court in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] in mid-January. "The judge found that the sentence had been just and that there was no cause for a new trial," one source told Forum 18. "In other words, the appeal was unsuccessful and there is now no hope of release." Friends and relatives had hoped that Annaniyazova would be freed in the recent prisoner amnesty, but that did not happen. But Forum 18 has learned that Jehovah's Witness Aga Soyegov, who was confined to a psychiatric hospital after refusing military service last November, has now been allowed back home.

In the wake of her sentence last November in Ashgabad on charges of illegally crossing the border, Cheper Annaniyazova's family was repeatedly told she would be transferred within days to the women's labour camp in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] (see F18News 5 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=699). However, contrary to earlier reports, as of mid-January when the appeal was heard, Annaniyazova had not yet been transferred from the women's prison in Ashgabad to the Dashoguz camp. Her current whereabouts remain unknown.

The exact charges that Annaniyazova faced remain unclear and the court has – as customary in Turkmenistan – refused to give out the written verdict as it is supposed to do. This was also the case with former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who is serving a 22 year sentence on charges the government has refused to make public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

Annaniyazova, one of the first people in Turkmenistan to become a Hare Krishna devotee, was accused under three charges, two of which related to illegally crossing the border three years ago when she went to Kazakhstan to live at the Hare Krishna temple in Almaty. The third accusation was, sources told Forum 18, not made public at the trial and the extra sentence imposed in the wake of the accusation was likewise not made public, though the sentence she received exceeds the maximum penalty possible under the known accusations. It is thought within Turkmenistan that the heavy sentence was imposed at the behest of the MSS (Ministry of State Security) secret police, in order to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690).

Jehovah's Witness Aga Soyegov, who is from the eastern city of Mary, was summoned to the city's Military Prosecutor's Office in November, where he was interrogated by a deputy prosecutor and threatened with imprisonment for his refusal to perform military service. Soyegov was then held for 10 days in the Military Prosecutor's Office and again interrogated before being sent to psychiatric hospital (see F18News 19 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=707).

Jehovah's Witness sources have confirmed to Forum 18 Soyegov's release from psychiatric hospital, adding that they believe he was not maltreated there. "He is back at home with his family and it is our understanding he was well-treated," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "Doctors there wanted to be helpful." Soyegov has also received a certificate to confirm that he is not eligible for military service on grounds of health.

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to young men forced to do military service and Jehovah's Witnesses and some Baptists who

refuse on grounds of religious conscience to serve in the armed forces have in the past been imprisoned. Forum 18 does not know of any current cases of religious believers imprisoned on these grounds.

Meanwhile, the second Russian Orthodox church in the eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) has finally gained state registration, six years after it reopened for worship and applied for registration. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that parish priest Fr Andrei Kiryakov (who also serves in the town's main Orthodox church, St Peter and St Paul) was able to tell the congregation at the St Nicholas the Wonder Worker church in early January that the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry had finally granted registration.

The church, built in the late nineteenth century, was closed under Stalin in 1936 and was not able to reopen until 2000, a year after President Saparmurat Niyazov had verbally allowed its reopening at a session of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council). Despite this verbal permission, and despite the parish having the 500 adult citizen signatories then required by law for any registration application, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights said that the Adalat Ministry and the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs had repeatedly found excuses to deny the parish registration. Officials questioned the authenticity of signatures and whether the signatories really were church members.

The Russian Orthodox Church – the second largest religious community in Turkmenistan with about a dozen functioning parishes – has faced strong pressure from the authorities to relinquish ties with its diocese in neighbouring Uzbekistan (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=603). While the second Turkmenabad parish was repeatedly denied the registration demanded in law before any religious community is officially allowed to function, the Adalat Ministry deliberately withheld the compulsory re-registration for all the other Russian Orthodox parishes in the wake of the revisions to the religion law in 2003. It was only in November 2005, after two years of foot-dragging, that these parishes finally gained re-registration (see F18News 22 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=693).

One of the biggest signs of the disfavour suffered by the Russian Orthodox is the continued failure of the authorities to allow the Church to build the new Resurrection cathedral in Ashgabad, planned in the mid-1990s. Allocated a 5 hectare plot of land by the President in the centre of the city, the Russian Orthodox Church held a high-profile design competition which was won in September 1996 by the Moscow architect Igor Voskresensky and the cathedral was to be completed by 2000. However, nothing has been built and the plot of land remains empty, though local residents think that the site remains earmarked for a future Russian Orthodox cathedral.

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

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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