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TURKMENISTAN: Protestants fined as crackdown continues

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

Five members of a non-denominational Protestant church in Abadan fined on 4 June for meeting as an unregistered community have vowed they will continue to practise their faith. "The authorities found us guilty of meeting without permission, but we are still going to meet, and they know this," one church member told Forum 18 News Service. The fines followed a raid on a private flat four days earlier where they were meeting. OSCE officials have been too busy to meet the Protestants so far. At least seven Protestant churches across Turkmenistan were raided in May in a new crackdown. One Protestant has written an open letter to President Saparmurat Niyazov, calling for sweeping changes to Turkmenistan's religious policy, an end to the repression of believers and an end to the system whereby an Orthodox clergyman can restrict the rights of other faiths and denominations.

Five members of a non-denominational Protestant church in the town of Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near the capital Ashgabad have been fined for meeting as an unregistered religious community, Forum 18 News Service has learnt from sources in Turkmenistan. The fines were handed down on 4 June, four days after a private flat where Protestants were meeting was raided by the authorities. One church member has written an open letter to President Saparmurat Niyazov, calling for sweeping changes to Turkmenistan's religious policy, an end to the repression of believers and an end to the system whereby an Orthodox clergyman can restrict the rights of other faiths and denominations.

The administrative commission of Abadan hyakimlik (administration) handed down the fines of 250,000 manats (328 Norwegian kroner, 40 Euros or 47 US dollars) each on Nuri Berdiev and his wife Nabat Niyazova, the owners of the flat raided by the authorities, as well as on Guzelya Syraeva, Lyudmila Galkina and Akgulya Niyazova. "Nuri complained that the fines on himself and on his wife are a heavy burden for the family to bear," a church member told Forum 18. "They may try to make it lower." Threats by the police and National Security Committee (KNB, former KGB) to confiscate Berdiev's flat, deport Syraeva from the country and deprive the others of the means of earning a living seem not to have been carried through.

Berdiev and Niyazova's flat was raided on 31 May, Christian books were confiscated and all the adults present were forced to go to the police station (see F18News 3 June 2003). The fines followed five days of long interrogations at the police and the hyakimlik which involved the hyakim of Abadan, the local police chief Gigeldi Annamukhamedov, the local KNB chief, the senior local Muslim cleric and other officials. During the interrogations, the five local Protestants were joined voluntarily by Radik Zakirov, a fellow Protestant from Ashgabad.

Despite the fines, the Protestants vow they will not give up practising their faith. "The authorities found us guilty of meeting without permission, but we are still going to meet, and they know this," one church member told Forum 18.

In view of what he described as "lawless and arbitrary action" against the Protestants in Abadan as the KNB "tried to remove from us our legal right to meet together simply because we are Evangelical Christians", Zakirov wrote to President Niyazov on 4 June. "The discrediting of the legal bases of Turkmenistan's society which has taken place in recent days leaves us with no hope that the situation will change for the better without special intervention from you as head of state."

Zakirov, who is a Turkmen citizen, quoted one police officer, Dortguly, as telling him: "In 1991 we gained independence, but until now you try to force your religion on us together with foreigners and spread your beliefs. Go back and meet together with your God there, at home. Here it is a Muslim country and a Muslim people and if you want to, go to the mosque and adopt Islam as your faith!"

He quoted one KNB officer, Batyr, as having told the Protestants: "We are banning you from meeting – and we're doing this on a legal basis." The officer described Article 205 of the administrative code, which punishes religious activity by unregistered groups, as "the foundation of our actions".

Batyr then added: "In taking religious literature from those who consider themselves as Christians we rely on the written instructions of Father Andrei Sapunov, representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Gengeshi [Committee] for religious affairs under the president of Turkmenistan. Here is his testimony about the Bibles we're confiscating from you." He then showed them a document signed by Father Andrei which included the phrase: "If there is no Orthodox cross on the Bible, it is a false Bible."

Zakirov called for the abolition of Article 205 of the administrative code, as well as for the religion law to be amended. "As the law on freedom of conscience and religious belief violates Articles 6 and 7 of the [1981] United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, I ask you to initiate a proposal to Turkmenistan's legislative body to amend it in favour of the right to freedom of religious belief which Turkmenistan recognises."

He also called for a review of the activity of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, recalling that he had personally spoken to Father Sapunov in his office there in 1996 about the possibility of opening a Christian bookshop. "During the talk Andrei Sapunov personally threatened me and fellow Evangelical Christian believers that he would set the National Security Committee [KNB] onto us if we did anything in any way in public." He called for changes to prevent "a representative of one denomination or confession from being able to pressure other denominations or confessions that oppose him, or to play a role as informer to the KNB or other state bodies".

In view of the denial of registration to Protestant congregations, Zakirov asked for clarification from President Niyazov over whether Protestant Christian activity violates the constitution and laws or not.

Zakirov said he had sent his open letter to various government institutions with the hope that they would pass it on to the president, as well as to the Ashgabad office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, he said he and his fellow-Protestants had not yet been able to meet OSCE officials. "They are always busy, and finally they told me I may call next Tuesday and ask again if they will meet us," he told Forum 18.

Neither Dieter Matthei, political officer at the OSCE office, nor Marioe-Jose van Rie, human dimension officer, have been prepared to talk to Forum 18 about the repression of religious believers.

The raid on the Abadan church came amid mounting pressure on Protestant congregations in Turkmenistan, with at least seven Protestant congregations raided in May. No Protestant churches have been allowed to register with the government, which treats all Protestant activity as illegal.

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