**FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway**
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*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*

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# TURKMENISTAN: Kindergarten teacher threatened with dismissal

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

*Days after being fined for attending meetings of a non-denominational Protestant church in Abadan, Guzelya Syraeva is fighting to keep her job as a teacher in a local kindergarten. Procuracy officials came to the kindergarten and told director Tazegyul Nurieva that her own job would be under threat if she did not sack Syraeva. The two were also pressured at the education department. "I do not preach to the children, because I know it is against the law," Syraeva insisted to Forum 18 News Service. "They are trying to sack me simply because of my religious beliefs." Officials denied to Forum 18 trying to have Syraeva dismissed.*

A member of a non-denominational Protestant community in the town of Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near the capital Ashgabad, whose meeting in a private flat was raided by officials on 31 May, is fighting to keep her job. Guzelya Syraeva is under pressure to submit her "voluntary" resignation from her post as a teacher at Abadan's kindergarten number 7 because of her religious beliefs, she told Forum 18 News Service from the town on 10 June. Three years ago a similar attempt to sack her from work failed. Officials have denied to Forum 18 that Syraeva is under pressure to resign.

Syraeva reported that the authorities began trying to dismiss her after she and four fellow church members were fined in court on 4 June for unlawful religious activity (see F18News 6 June 2003). She said that soon after the court case, staff from the Abadan procuracy came to the kindergarten and threatened the kindergarten's director, Tazegyul Nurieva, with being sacked herself if she did not dismiss Syraeva.

Syraeva and Nurieva were also both summoned to the town's education department, where another attempt was made to persuade the teacher to write a statement submitting her voluntary resignation. "I do not preach to the children, because I know it is against the law," Syraeva insisted to Forum 18. "They are trying to sack me simply because of my religious beliefs."

Syraeva fears that if she herself does not resign voluntarily, the authorities will find some other way to sack her. "I am a Tatar by birth and I cannot write fluently in Turkmen," she said. "The authorities may take advantage of that and sack me for not knowing the state language."

But reached by telephone at the kindergarten, director Nurieva denied that anyone wanted to dismiss Syraeva. "She is still working and I can call her to the telephone," Nurieva told Forum 18 on 10 June. However, asked whether the authorities had made attempts to get Syraeva dismissed, Nurieva said she "would not discuss that subject".

The head of the personnel department at Abadan's education department, Sakhra Kurbangeldieva, also denied that attempts were being made to sack Syraeva. "She is still working and no-one is forcing her to resign," Kurbangeldieva told Forum 18 from Abadan on 10 June.

Despite several attempts to reach the procurator of Ahal region, in which Abadan lies, Forum 18 was unable to speak to him or his deputy. Officials said each time that neither was present. On 12 June Forum 18 did manage to speak to the procurator of Abadan. "I won't give out any information by telephone," he declared, refusing even to give his name. "Come here to the town and I will speak to you then." However, he denied absolutely that he had been involved in Syraeva's case. "I know nothing about any Protestants at all," he told Forum 18. "No Protestant has come to me."

The attempts to dismiss Syraeva have come during a new crackdown on religious minorities. At least seven Protestant congregations and two Hare Krishna communities have been raided since early May (see F18News 10 June 2003).

Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics. No faiths except for the officially-approved Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been allowed to register any communities. The government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal. Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and other Protestants, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutherans, the Jews, Hare Krishna communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and others are thus denied the opportunity of worshipping legally.

As part of its campaign against religious minorities, a number of Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have been sacked from their


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jobs in a variety of institutions, including schools and hospitals.

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