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TURKMENISTAN: Official exit ban list confirmed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Former Baptist prisoner of conscience Shageldy Atakov is the latest person, known to Forum 18 News Service, banned from leaving Turkmenistan apparently because of their religious activity. "We blocked him from travelling – he's here on the list," a Migration Service officer told Forum 18. "People are only stopped from leaving if they have problems with the government," he added, without explaining what reasons trigger exit bans. As well as the Migration Service, the MSS secret police can also impose exit bans. "Sometimes we work together with them, sometimes separately," the official said. Forum 18 knows of an increasing number of Turkmen residents banned from leaving the country, because the authorities do not like their religious activity. Protestants are frequent victims of the exit ban policy, but others known to have been banned from exit are Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses. The number of Muslim haj pilgrims is also severely restricted.

Former Baptist prisoner of conscience Shageldy Atakov was denied permission to leave Turkmenistan on 25 May without being given a reason, Baptist sources and the Migration Service at Ashgabad [Ashgabat] Airport told Forum 18 News Service on 31 May. "We blocked him from travelling – he's here on the list," a Migration Service officer at the airport who refused to give his name told Forum 18. However, he declined absolutely to explain why Atakov was barred from travelling. "We have a rule that we can't give out such information, but people are only stopped from leaving if they have problems with the government." He declined to explain what reasons would bar someone from being allowed to leave.

Known dissidents have long faced problems in trying to leave Turkmenistan – both before and after the much-trumpeted abolition of exit visas in January 2004 – and Forum 18 is aware of an increasing number of Turkmen residents banned from leaving the country because the authorities do not like their religious activity.

Among recent cases, a group of Protestants who had visas for their destination country were not handed their pre-paid tickets ahead of their planned departure from Ashgabad airport in April 2006 and were thus unable to travel (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787). Protestants are frequent victims, but others known to have been denied permission to leave are Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=685).

Current Hare Krishna prisoner of conscience Cheper Annaniyazova is still in jail, on a seven year jail term, after being accused on three charges, two of which relate to illegally crossing the border in 2002. The third charge has not been made public. She has pointed out that many others who did what she did were not being charged (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690). It is believed within Turkmenistan that the jailing was inspired by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 3 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=754).

The number of Muslims allowed to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca is also severely restricted by the government, to under five percent of potential pilgrims, despite the requirement in Islam for able-bodied Muslims who can afford to do so to make the pilgrimage (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711).

The Migration Service official explained to Forum 18 that "we decide" if Turkmen residents can leave or not, but declined to explain how the blacklist works. "If travellers have passed through passport control before they are stopped, that means there is no problem with us. If anyone is stopped after passport control, it wasn't we who decided." He said that the MSS secret police can also bar someone from leaving. "Sometimes we work together with them, sometimes separately," he told Forum 18.

Although the official refused to say how many people are barred from leaving from Ashgabad airport each day, regular travellers from the airport have told Forum 18 in recent months that several people are routinely taken off each flight, often from the aeroplane itself after they have passed through passport control.

As part of their isolationist policies, the Turkmen authorities usually deny visas to foreign religious figures wishing to come to the country to make contact with local fellow-believers (see eg. F18News 26 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=439).

Baptist sources told Forum 18 that Atakov – a Turkmen citizen - was due to fly to Moscow to meet fellow Baptists. He already had a ticket, had passed through passport control and was sitting in the aeroplane when officers of the secret police took him off the flight shortly before takeoff was due. "Officers told him they had an order 'from above' not to allow him to leave the country," one Baptist told Forum 18. "But none of them was prepared to say who had issued the order."

After being barred from leaving, Atakov wrote a letter of complaint but the officers would not say who it would be passed on to. "This travel ban is something new for our people," the Baptist added.

The Migration Service official claimed that those denied permission to leave can complain to the Migration Service's Central Directorate in the capital, Ashgabad. "They'll give people the reason why they've been banned from travelling abroad," he told Forum 18. He also claimed that those refused permission to leave can reclaim seventy percent of the cost of their ticket from Turkmenistan Airlines or, if they are travelling on another airline, from that airline. "They'll give that money back even if it's not the fault of the traveller that they can't leave," he insisted. However, the Baptists say Atakov has not received back the money he spent on his ticket to Moscow.

Atakov – a convert to Christianity who is a member of a Council of Churches Baptist congregation, who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries - was arrested in Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] in December 1998. He was sentenced in March 1999 on charges of swindling and forging documents, which church members insist were fabricated to obstruct his church activities. While imprisoned, he was forcibly treated with psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs. He was freed in January 2002 after intense international pressure, returning to live with his wife Artygul and their five children in the town of Kaakhka, midway between Ashgabad and Tejenstroy, near the border with Iran (see F18News 24 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=194).

Since his release, Atakov has visited Russia. Baptists told Forum 18 that more than four years after his release from labour camp he remains under close surveillance.

The abolition of exit visas on paper, but continued practice of barring people from leaving the country, is not the only claimed "improvement" which violates the religious freedom of Turkmen citizens. Allegedly easier state registration of religious communities – part of another claimed "liberalisation" – is not experienced as a "liberalisation" by many religious communities (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

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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