

31 August 2007

TURKMENISTAN: Fifth conscientious objector to be prosecuted?

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

Begench Shakhmuradov could become the fifth Jehovah's Witness to be sentenced this summer for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. "He was called up in May and the military commission deemed him fit for service although he still suffers from tuberculosis he contracted in prison while serving an earlier sentence for refusing military service," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service from Ashgabad. His case is with the Prosecutor's Office. Shirin Akhmedova, head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked why religious believers are still being prosecuted. A planned 24-hour family visit with imprisoned Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was cut without explanation to just 40 minutes, his family complained to Forum 18. "Of course we all cried and were all upset," his family told Forum 18. Meanwhile, Merdan Shirmedov, a Protestant from Dashoguz banned from leaving Turkmenistan since January, has been able to leave to rejoin his wife and their daughter he had never seen.

Yet another Jehovah's Witness is expected to face trial for his refusal to serve compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Begench Shakhmuradov has already served one sentence on the same charges, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. One of the four Jehovah's Witnesses already sentenced this year, Suleiman Udaev, has been told he is to be transferred soon from the labour camp in Mary to the prison in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew). Meanwhile, a planned 24-hour family visit with imprisoned Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was cut without explanation to just 40 minutes, his family complained to Forum 18.

Reached at her office in Ashgabad on 31 August, Shirin Akhmedova, head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked why religious believers are still being prosecuted and held in labour camps for peaceful exercise of their faith.

Shakhmuradov, who is from Ashgabad, was sentenced there in February 2005 to one year's imprisonment for refusing military service. He was prosecuted under Article 219, Part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. Jehovah's Witness young men insist they are ready to do alternative non-military service, but Turkmenistan offers no non-combat alternative to those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Shakhmuradov was among several Jehovah's Witnesses freed early from their sentences in April 2005 in the wake of a presidential decree (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=548). However, like other freed Jehovah's Witnesses he has intermittently been threatened with renewed call-up.

"Begench's case has already been handed to the Prosecutor's Office, though we don't yet know when the trial will be," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabad on 30 August. "He was called up in May and the military commission deemed him fit for service although he still suffers from tuberculosis he contracted in prison while serving an earlier sentence for refusing military service." Shakhmuradov is at home while the prosecutor works on his case.

Udaev, a 24-year-old Jehovah's Witness, was sentenced by Mary District Court to 18 months' imprisonment on 7 August. He is also in debt after being fined in July the "huge sum" of 1,250,000 Manats (1,425 Norwegian Kroner, 178 Euros or 240 US Dollars at the inflated official bank rate) for preaching (see F18News 15 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1008).

Sources in Turkmenistan told Amnesty International in late August that Udaev's family have not yet received any response to their appeals against his sentence. They added that he was transferred in mid-August to another cell in the detention facility in Mary. "In this cell are also some 20 prisoners and the heat is terrible," sources told Amnesty International. Although Udaev was told that he would soon be transferred to Turkmenabad prison, no reason or date was given.

Udaev's relatives were able to make a second visit to him in mid-August and are able to pass on food parcels to him.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses were given suspended sentences in July for refusing military service, Aleksandr Zuyev, Bayram Ashirgeldyyev and Nuryagdy Gayyrov. Ashirgeldyyev complained that the military commission refuses to give Gayyrov and himself the necessary stamp authorising them to take work they have found. "They should do this, but they say they won't agree to

it," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 31 August. "Getting work is one of the conditions of the sentence. As well as not being able to earn any money, we might then face other problems."

A Baptist leader from the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk], 49-year-old Kalataevsky was sentenced to three years' imprisonment on 14 May for illegally crossing the border six years earlier. His family has insisted to Forum 18 that the sentence was imposed to punish him for his activity with the unregistered Baptist congregation in Turkmenbashi. In late June he was transferred to the men's labour camp in Seydi 1,200 kms (750 miles) from his home city (see F18News 13 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1006).

"The whole family decided to go and travelled all the way to the labour camp for the promised 14 August meeting," Kalataevsky's family told Forum 18 on 29 August. They say one of his daughters, Nastya, was celebrating her eighteenth birthday and they took a cake they had baked. "But alas. They gave us just an hour, and in the end we got only 40 minutes. Of course we all cried and were all upset." Kalataevsky's son-in-law was not allowed into the meeting. The family complain the journey was not cheap and it took a day and a half to travel across the country to the labour camp.

The family adds that Kalataevsky is now only allowed visits once every 56 days.

Fellow-Baptist Yevgeny Potolov, also from Turkmenbashi, was arrested soon after Kalataevsky, but was deported from Turkmenistan in early July. Potolov, a Russian citizen, had his residence permit stripped from him in 2001 to punish him for his religious activity. However, his wife Nadezhda and their seven children have valid residence permits. Yet the authorities – who raided their church's service on 12 August - have been threatening them with deportation (see F18News 15 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1008).

"All has gone quiet and the deportation threats have subsided," Potolov's family in Russia told Forum 18 on 30 August. "But all their appeals for Yevgeny to be allowed to return – both Nadezhda's there and Yevgeny's here – have been rejected. They are all still waiting for him to be allowed to rejoin his family."

Meanwhile Merdan Shirmedov, a member of a prominent Protestant family in the north-eastern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz], finally had his exit ban lifted in July. He was able to fly to Istanbul in Turkey on 20 August to be reunited with his wife Wendy Lucas, a US citizen. He was also able to see for the first time their daughter, who was born in the United States on 18 May. "We're just grateful we can be back together and get on with our family," Shirmedov and Lucas told Forum 18 from Istanbul on 23 August.

Shirmedov had been barred from leaving in January and had been trying to have the ban overturned (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

"The high court wrote in early July to say I could leave, but gave no explanation as to why I had earlier been banned from leaving," Shirmedov told Forum 18. Both Lucas and Shirmedov believe that the exit ban was imposed in punishment for his involvement with his local Protestant congregation. The church is one of a number of Protestant congregations led by ethnic Turkmens which have been barred from gaining legal status. (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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY