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TURKMENISTAN: Baptist freed, Jehovah's Witness threatened with new sentence

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

Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky has been freed after being amnestied from a three year labour camp sentence, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "My wife Valentina wrote an official statement that I will not violate the law," he told Forum 18. "I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to all who supported me and my family during my imprisonment." Asked about his health in the wake of his eight months in prison, Kalataevsky responded: "God strengthened me physically." Two Jehovah's Witnesses, who are serving suspended sentences have not been amnestied. Begench Shakhmuradov received a two year sentence in September 2007, and Bayram Ashirgeldyyev was given an 18 month sentence in July 2007. Ashirgeldyyev has been threatened with a new sentence, even though he is still serving his current suspended sentence. He has been barred from work unless he receives a stamp from the Military Commissariat, which refuses to give him this. Another Jehovah's Witness, Ashirgeldy Taganov, also faces prosecution for refusing military service on grounds of religious conscience.

One month after being amnestied, Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was finally freed from a detention centre in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on the evening of 6 November and was allowed to join family members who live in the city. "My wife Valentina wrote an official statement that I will not violate the law," Kalataevsky told Forum 18 News Service from Ashgabad on 8 November. "She took the responsibility on herself." He said no restrictions on his movement or other conditions were imposed. "I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to all who supported me and my family during my imprisonment."

Asked about his health in the wake of his eight months in prison, Kalataevsky responded: "God strengthened me physically."

Kalataevsky said he did not know if his release was timed to coincide with a visit to European Union leaders in Brussels by Turkmenistan's president Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov. "It is possible that such things were taken into account, but everything is in the hands of God," he told Forum 18.

Kalataevsky was among some 9,000 prisoners pardoned in the annual amnesty to mark the Muslim Night of Omnipotence within Ramadan, which this year fell on 9 October. But unlike other prisoners, he was not freed. Instead, he was transferred to a police holding centre in Arzuv on the north-eastern edge of Ashgabad, as the authorities decided whether to deport him (see F18News 9 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1031).

Of the seven religious believers who have been serving sentences this year to punish them for their religious activity, five have now been amnestied. The final two who have not been amnestied are Bayram Ashirgeldyyev and Begench Shakhmuradov. Both are Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to do compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Shakhmuradov received a two year suspended sentence in September 2007, and Ashirgeldyyev was given an 18 month suspended sentence in July 2007 (see F18News 13 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1017).

After President Berdimukhammedov came to power, his government began jailing and attacking members of religious minorities (see eg. F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963). These violations had lessened in the last stages of former President Niyazov's rule. At the time of Niyazov's death, some within Turkmenistan noted that state officials had a vested interest in continuing repressive policies (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894).

Ashirgeldyyev has already been threatened with a new sentence, even though he is still serving his current suspended sentence, family members told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 8 November. They said that on 7 November he had gone to the Military Commissariat, to again ask for the stamp he requires from them which will allow him to apply for work. This has previously been refused to Ashirgeldyyev and his fellow Jehovah's Witness Nuryagdy Gayyrov (see F18News 31 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1013). Refusing the latest request, one officer told Ashirgeldyyev that he had not been punished harshly enough and threatened that he would be punished again on the same charges.

Moreover, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 8 November that another of their young men faces prosecution for

refusing military service after refusing his first call-up. Ashirgeldy Taganov, whose nickname is Azis, told the conscription office in his home district in Ashgabad that he would not serve military service on grounds of religious conscience. His case was then passed to the Prosecutor's Office.

Conscientious objectors are 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 alternative service possibility for those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Following his release from jail this week, Kalataevsky told Forum 18 that he will now try to resolve his residence problems. He said the Foreign Ministry has agreed that a six-month visa to live in Turkmenistan will be granted. He added that he would be leaving later on 8 November for Turkmenbashi, where the paperwork would be sorted out and he will apply for a residence permit. The Ukrainian Embassy in Ashgabad has already extended the validity of his Ukrainian passport.

Kalataevsky told Forum 18 that during his imprisonment the Baptist congregation he leads continued to meet for worship. The 49-year-old leads an independent Baptist congregation in the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk], the town where he was born. He was arrested by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police on 12 March. He was found guilty of "illegally crossing the border" and on 14 May was given a three-year labour camp sentence, which he was sent to serve in Seydi (see F18News 31 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1013).

The charges related to Kalataevsky's return to Turkmenistan after his residence permit was summarily stripped from him and he was deported in 2001. Dumped with no paperwork or money across the border in Kazakhstan, he was obliged to return to his family a week later as he had nowhere to go.

Also stripped of his residence permit in 2001 and dumped across the border in Kazakhstan with Kalataevsky was fellow-Baptist Yevgeny Potolov, a Russian citizen also from Turkmenbashi. He was arrested earlier this year soon after Kalataevsky, but was deported from Turkmenistan in early July. He was told verbally that he would be banned from returning within one year. Potolov's family were subsequently threatened with deportation (see F18News 31 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1013).

After failing to secure Potolov's return, his wife and children left Turkmenistan to join him in Russia, but intend to return home to Turkmenbashi if and when he is allowed to return.

Over the past decade, one Turkmen citizen and hundreds of foreign citizens living in Turkmenistan who were active in religious communities have been deported. Most were Muslims, with the rest being Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. (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>.

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