

30 September 2009

TURKMENISTAN: Two more Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors imprisoned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two young Jehovah's Witnesses have joined two other Jehovah's Witnesses already incarcerated in the labour camp in Seydi after being sentenced in July for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. Shadurdi Uchetov, who is 21, received the maximum two-year term, while 19-year-old Akmurat Egendurdiev received an 18-month term. Both had their appeals rejected in their absence. Jehovah's Witnesses complain three of the four have been obstructed from lodging further appeals. Egendurdiev was tried after being summoned to Dashoguz town administration, where "three elderly men tried to persuade him to change his mind" about his refusal to serve in the army, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, a former Baptist inmate of the Seydi camp, told Forum 18 it is in the desert and close to several chemical works, and conditions are not easy. "It is like something from the Middle Ages."

Two young Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in July for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience have been transferred to the labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. The two – 21-year-old Shadurdi Uchetov and 19-year-old Akmurat Egendurdiev – were both sentenced in the northern Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] Region. The new sentences bring to four the number of Jehovah's Witnesses known to Forum 18 to be imprisoned for refusing military service, all now being held in the Seydi camp. Jehovah's Witnesses complain that three of the four have been obstructed from lodging further appeals. Three other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are serving non-custodial sentences.

The two new conscientious objectors were sentenced 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 Witnesses call for those sentenced to be amnestied "so that they can return to their families". They call on the authorities to introduce a civilian alternative service to military service, adding that this would allow the young men to be useful to the country "without harming their conscience". "This would show the willingness of the Turkmen authorities to respect freedom of conscience," Jehovah's Witnesses maintained.

Jehovah's Witness young men insist they are ready to do alternative non-military service. However, Turkmenistan offers no non-combat alternative to those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Forum 18 was unable to find out on 30 September why those who cannot serve in the armed forces on grounds of religious conscience are still being imprisoned and why no moves appear to be underway to introduce an alternative civilian service. The man who answered the telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, a Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], repeatedly hung up as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

Shirin Akhmedova, Director of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and Shemshat Atajanova, a head of department there, were in a "big conference" and unavailable, officials told Forum 18. No other officials at the Institute were available.

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on 19 March, Akhmedova had rejected the recommendations from numerous international organisations – including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jahangir – that Turkmenistan introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. Akhmedova instead pointed to Article 41 of the Constitution, which describes defence as a "sacred duty" of everyone and then states that military service is compulsory for men (see F18News 20 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1285).

The two new conscientious objector prisoners

Uchetov was sentenced by Judge Guncha Muradova at Dashoguz town court on 13 July to two years' imprisonment, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The prosecutor was Sh. Yeleyshova. He appealed against the judgment, but a panel of three judges at the Regional Court, sitting in his absence on 11 August, rejected the appeal.

Uchetov's supporters prepared a further appeal to Turkmenistan's Supreme Court in Ashgabad and tried to meet him in prison in Dashoguz to gain his signature. However, they were told that on 13 July, three days after the original sentence, without waiting for the appeal, the authorities had transferred Uchetov to the Seydi labour camp. This made it impossible for him to file an appeal to the Supreme Court within the prescribed period.

Just over two weeks later, on 29 July, Egendurdiev was sentenced by Boldumsaz District Court to one and a half years' imprisonment. He had been summoned earlier in the month to the town khyakimlik (administration), where "three elderly men tried to persuade him to change his mind" about his refusal to serve in the army, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "When they understood that he did not give in, a criminal case was opened and the case brought to court."

Egendurdiev's appeal too was heard on 18 August by Dashoguz Regional Court in his absence and was rejected. A further appeal was lodged at the Supreme Court, but this has not yet been heard. Egendurdiev too was transferred to the Seydi camp.

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

Both Baptist and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience have previously been held in the Seydi Camp. There have been indications that some of these prisoners were tortured in the camp with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Conditions in the Seydi Camp are harsh. "It is set in the desert and is close to several chemical works. Of course conditions are not easy. It is like something from the Middle Ages," Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, a Baptist who was imprisoned there in 2007 to punish him for his religious activity before being deported from Turkmenistan, told Forum 18 from Ukraine on 30 September (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

Kalataevsky recalls that there were then some 3,500 prisoners in six or seven barracks in the camp. He said the temperature in the summer is close to being unbearably hot. He said prisoners under 50 year of age work ten hour days (with a lunch break) in the camp's industrial zone, in the brick factory, metalworking plant or clothing factory. He said food and water is adequate "though not wonderful".

He added that life is difficult for religious believers, especially if they discuss their faith with other prisoners. "There would be trouble from the administration and from other prisoners," he told Forum 18. He said he was not beaten there, but was often placed in the punishment isolation cell for "violations" which were fabricated by the administration.

Other sentenced Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors

The two other Jehovah's Witnesses currently serving terms of imprisonment for refusing military service - Sakhemurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov – are brothers. The two, who are from the town of Serdar (formerly Gyzylarbat) in western Turkmenistan, were originally sent to serve their sentences in the prison in the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] before being transferred to the Seydi camp.

Tried at Serdar Town Court in November 2008, they were each given a two year suspended sentence. However, in May 2009 the same judge ruled that they should both be transferred to prison to serve their full terms, so their new sentences are due to run until May 2011. They became the first Jehovah's Witnesses since July 2007 to be jailed for refusing military service on grounds of religious conscience (see F18News 2 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1304).

On 3 June the two brothers lodged appeals against the new sentences, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The appeal hearing was scheduled for 23 June, but was then adjourned until 30 June after Judge Ahmed Agoyliev of Balkan Regional Court in Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) allowed their father, Yazmammed Annamamedov, to engage a lawyer to represent his two sons. However, no lawyer was willing to represent them, so their father had to do so himself. On 30 June Judge Agoyliev upheld the May decision.

Since their transfer to the Seydi labour camp, Yazmammed Annamamedov has been able to meet his two sons. However, he discovered that the verbal confirmation of the Prosecutor's Office in Turkmenbashi that the two men's appeals had reached the Supreme Court was "a lie", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "No one had given the two brothers the applications for signature as the father had been assured." They say Yazmammed Annamamedov is now preparing an appeal to the General Prosecutor's Office to

allow more time to lodge the appeals.

Many Jehovah's Witness young men have been sentenced over the past fifteen years for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious faith. However, in the past few years most of the sentences have been suspended or have been sentences to forced labour, where individuals live at home and have 20 per cent of their wages taken by the state. The three other Jehovah's Witnesses serving sentences are:

Vladimir Golosenko, who is from the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi, was sentenced under Article 219 Part 1 on 12 February 2008 to two years' forced labour. He is not in prison, but 20 percent of his wages go to the state (see F18News 31 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1166).

Zafar Abdullaev was given a two-year suspended sentence by Dashoguz City Court on 8 April 2009 for refusing compulsory military service. He is currently living at home (see F18News 20 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1285).

On 22 April, the same court also handed down a two-year suspended sentence on the same charges to Dovran Kushmanov, a 27-year-old Jehovah's Witness. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 he has to report weekly to the police. (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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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