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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

21 October 2010

TURKMENISTAN: "They didn't even allow him to kiss me"

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

Turkmenistan has jailed two more prisoners of conscience, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev was today (21 October) jailed for four years and is likely to be sent to the Seydi labour camp where there have been claims of the use of psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs against prisoners. In mid-September a Jehovah's Witness, Ahmet Hudaybergenov, who conscientiously objects to compulsory military service, was sentenced to one and a half years. Pastor Nurliev's wife and fellow-church members strongly deny the authorities' allegations, and are seriously concerned for his health as the court ordered forced treatment for alleged drug addiction. A diabetic, they told Forum 18 he looked "very, very pale and thin" at the trial. Among "witnesses" produced by the authorities was a woman who was in jail on criminal charges when the authorities claimed she gave Pastor Nurliev money. Friends of Nurliev present at the trial told Forum 18 that "it was clear the whole thing was set up". Nurliev was surrounded at the trial by MSS secret police officers, who prevented his wife from coming close to her husband. "They didn't even allow him to kiss me," Maya Nurlieva complained to Forum 18.

In Turkmenistan, Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev was today (21 October) given a four-year prison term on charges of swindling. His wife and church members insist the charges have been fabricated to punish him for his religious activity. Judge Agajan Akjaev of Mary Town Court in south-eastern Turkmenistan ruled that Nurliev will serve his sentence in the general regime labour camp in Seydi, his wife and lawyer both confirmed from the south-eastern town of Mary.

"The court also ruled that Ilmurad is a drug addict and ordered forced treatment for this in prison," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 News Service. "This is unjust and a slander." In reality, Pastor Nurliev is under treatment for diabetes, and his wife has been denied the opportunity to see him or give him his medicines since his arrest in August (see F18News 18 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1499).

In mid-September Ahmet Hudaybergenov, a Jehovah's Witness who conscientiously objects to compulsory military service, was sentenced to one and a half years. Both Nurliev and Hudaybergenov are likely to be sent to Seydi labour camp, where Baptist and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience have previously been held. 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).

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan

746222 Lebap vilayet

Seydi

uchr. LB-K/12

"They didn't even allow him to kiss me"

Nurlieva said her husband – whom she had not seen since his arrest two months earlier – looked "very, very pale and thin". She said that during the trial he was held in a cage, which was surrounded by Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers, who prevented her from coming close to her husband. "They didn't even allow him to kiss me," she complained. She said she recognised one of the officers, who had raided their home a year or two ago.

Because Nurliev's trial ended with the verdict late in the evening, Forum 18 was unable to reach court or Prosecutor's Office officials.

"The whole thing was set up"

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Other friends of Nurliev present at the trial told Forum 18 that "it was clear the whole thing was set up". One Protestant who was not present but who has known Nurliev for many years told Forum 18 of shock at the verdict. "He is not a drug addict or a swindler."

Pastor Nurliev's wife and church members vigorously refute the accusations, and strongly question the credibility of prosecution witnesses (see F18News 18 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1499). 15 church members who came to the Church's Sunday worship service on 29 August - two days after the arrest - signed an appeal to the Prosecutor's Office testifying to Pastor Nurliev's innocence (see F18News 30 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481). Police applied heavy pressure - including threats that her husband would be fired from his job - against another church member to falsely testify against Pastor Nurliev, but she refused to do this (see F18News 30 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481).

"But he's not guilty"

Pastor Nurliev was convicted on charges of swindling a large amount of money from citizens under Article 228, Part 2 of the Criminal Code, which carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment and confiscation of property. Money and a certificate as a preacher which he gained in 2006, seized during his arrest, have still not been returned. The charges and false allegations made by the prosecution are emphatically denied by Pastor Nurliev's family and fellow-believers (see F18News 18 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1499).

Nurlieva told Forum 18 that the court said that if Nurliev pays the 1,600 Manats (3,270 Norwegian Kroner, 402 Euros or 561 US Dollars) prosecutors allege he swindled from people who came to his church, he might be eligible for a prisoner amnesty. "But he's not guilty," she insisted.

The written verdict is due to be handed down in three days, and Nurliev has ten days from 21 October to lodge an appeal, his lawyer told Forum 18. He said that unless an appeal is successful, Nurliev is almost certain to be sent to the general regime labour camp near the eastern town of Seydi, which is where Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are currently being held.

Denied registration, added to exit ban list, imprisoned

A 45-year-old grandfather of two, Pastor Nurliev leads the Light to the World Pentecostal Church in Mary. The church has been repeatedly denied registration since 2007, the same year that Pastor Nurliev was placed on the country's exit ban list without officials explaining why (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

He was arrested on 27 August and was held in a crowded, smoky cell in the two months before the trial.

Trial – with a witness who was in jail

The trial had been due to begin at 10 am, but did not start until 4.30 pm and finished in the evening, Nurlieva added. She complained that Prosecutor Ataev, who handled the case in court, produced only the two women who had written accusations against her husband that he had extracted money from them. She said there was no sign of the three men who, the prosecution claimed, had made similar allegations. She added that at the time one of the women claimed to have handed Nurliev some money, she was imprisoned on criminal charges. "So how could she have met my husband and given him money?" Maya Nurlieva asked.

She also complained that of the fifteen church members present in the courtroom who wanted to speak up on Nurliev's behalf, only three – including herself – were allowed to do so.

The official who answered the telephone at the Mary Prosecutor's Office on 21 October told Forum 18 that the working day was over and neither Prosecutor Ataev nor other staff were present. The telephone at Mary Court went unanswered when Forum 18 called in the evening in the wake of the trial.

Diplomat refused entry to court

Nurlieva said court officials had refused to let in a diplomat from the United States Embassy who had travelled from the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] to observe the trial. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 19 October – soon after the date of the trial became known – that it had "sent a Note Verbale requesting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate the Centre's attendance at the court trial on 21 October in Mary". Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the request was granted.

Conscientious objector jailed for one and a half years

After refusing military service, 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness Ahmet Hudaybergenov was arrested on 7 September in his home town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) in north-eastern Turkmenistan. He was sentenced on 20 September at Turkmenabad Court to a year and a half in prison, apparently under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. It is believed he did not appeal against the

sentence and is thought to have been transferred to the labour camp near Seydi, where the other seven other imprisoned conscientious objectors are being held.

Article 219 Part 1 of the Criminal Code punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment.

The latest case brings to eleven the number of sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses. Eight are serving labour camp terms of between 18 months and two years, while the other three are serving non-custodial sentences (see F18News 4 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495).

Prisoner of conscience "beaten black and blue"

Two Jehovah's Witness young men, Aziz Roziev from Seydi and Dovleyet Byashimov from Turkmenabad, were each given 18-month prison terms in separate trials in August on the same charges as Hudaybergenov. Soon after Byashimov's trial, his parents were allowed a short meeting with their son in Turkmenabad prison in early September and "saw that he had been beaten black and blue," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 (see F18News 4 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495).

After Roziev's transfer to the Seydi labour camp, he was able to receive a visit from his father, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors have been routinely excluded from prisoner amnesties in recent years. Ashirgeldy Taganov was released from a suspended sentence in February 2008 (see F18News 24 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1448).

Other violations of freedom of religion or belief

Turkmenistan continues to impose an exit ban list to cut off religious believers and other civil society activists from personal contacts outside the country. The numbers of Muslims being allowed to take part in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca – which is a requirement in Islam for all who can undertake it – is being restricted to 188 people, including members of the MSS secret police to monitor pilgrims (see F18News 19 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1500).

When a legal Christian young people's summer camp was raided, participants – particularly ethnic Turkmens - were arrested, insulted, threatened and had personal Bibles confiscated by police. Camp leaders pointed out their rights to meet under Turkmenistan's Constitution, but police officers then insulted the Constitution. "To put it mildly, the Constitution is only a scrap of paper for the Turkmen authorities," one Protestant complained to Forum 18, "while the Church's legal status means even less." Others have been pressured to sign statements that they will not meet for worship, and two Protestants were fired from their jobs because of their faith. Registration – and hence the right to carry out activities legally - remains impossible for many religious communities, and re-registration is being used as a weapon to stop religious activity. Strict censorship and border controls are still being imposed on all religious literature and religious believers (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1474). (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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