

10 October 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Jehovah's Witness freed early from camp

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Oguljan Jumanazarova, a Jehovah's Witness lawyer serving a four year sentence in the women's labour camp in the northern town of Tashauz, was freed early on 20 September, the Jehovah's Witness centre in St Petersburg has told Forum 18 News Service. Jumanazarova, from the town of Seydi, was sentenced in July 2001 on fraud charges that the Jehovah's Witnesses insist were imposed in retaliation for helping fellow Jehovah's Witnesses with their legal problems. "Nothing more is known about the terms of her release – only that she has been freed," a Jehovah's Witness spokesman told Forum 18. The Jehovah's Witnesses – like all non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities – have been denied registration and are treated as illegal.

A lawyer serving a four year sentence – apparently imposed in retaliation for helping her fellow Jehovah's Witnesses – was freed early from the women's labour camp in Tashauz in the north of the country on 20 September, the Jehovah's Witness centre in the Russian city of St Petersburg told Forum 18 News Service. Oguljan Jumanazarova, who is 41, began a four year sentence in July 2001 and had therefore not been due for release until July 2005. "She was taken from the camp and placed on the train, apparently to make sure she would not talk to anyone on the way home. Nothing more is known about the terms of her release – only that she has been freed," a Jehovah's Witness spokesman told Forum 18. "She is said to be in good spirits."

Jumanazarova, who became a Jehovah's Witness in 1999, worked for a public attorneys' association in the town of Seydi close to Turkmenistan's north-eastern border with Uzbekistan. She began to face pressure after helping fellow-believers with their legal problems. In 1999, the authorities tried to confine her in a psychiatric hospital, which she managed to avoid by temporarily fleeing from the town. She was arrested in July 2001, tried and sentenced. The Jehovah's Witnesses say her sentence, on accusations of fraud, was based on fabricated evidence. Her sister took care of her daughter while she served her sentence.

Although Jumanazarova has been freed, five other Jehovah's Witnesses are reported to remain imprisoned, four of them for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Three of the four prisoners – whose names remain unknown - were sentenced in August to one and a half years' imprisonment, while the fourth conscientious objector, Nikolai Shelekhov, completes his one and a half year sentence (his second) next January (see F18News 2 October 2003). The other prisoner is believed to be Kurban Zakirov, sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in 2000 and believed to be held in a labour camp in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi.

President Saparmurat Niyazov periodically decrees prisoner amnesties – the next scheduled amnesty is to mark the Muslim holy night at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan (in Turkmen, Gydyr gijesi), which this year falls on 21-22 November. However, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners have never been freed under such amnesties, as they refuse to repent of their "crime" and swear the required oath of loyalty to the president on the Koran and the president's spiritual book, the Ruhnama.

The Jehovah's Witnesses – like all non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities – have been denied registration and are treated as illegal. Members have been sacked from their jobs, had their homes confiscated in punishment for using them for meetings and been fined.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY