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TURKMENISTAN: Fines doubled for Balkanabad Baptists

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Already fined some 48 US dollars each (at the inflated official exchange rate) for participating in "illegal religious meetings", the members of a Baptist church are now seeing their fines doubled. "At present the local authorities of the town of Balkanabad are prohibiting the Baptists from meeting for worship, in violation of the rights guaranteed in Turkmenistan's Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," church members complained in a 3 October statement reaching Forum 18 News Service. "And they have increased the level of fines to 500,000 manats." No officials of the regional or town procurators' offices or the regional or town administrations were prepared to tell Forum 18 why the Baptists have been handed down such heavy fines for meeting for worship in private homes.

Members of a Baptist church in the town of Balkanabad in western Turkmenistan are now seeing their fines doubled for participating in "illegal religious meetings", local Baptists complained in a 3 October statement reaching Forum 18 News Service. In July and August, each church member was fined 250,000 manats (363 Norwegian kroner, 44 Euros or 48 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate, four times the street rate), but heavier fines are now being imposed. "At present the local authorities of the town of Balkanabad are prohibiting the Baptists from meeting for worship, in violation of the rights guaranteed in Turkmenistan's Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," church members complained. "And they have increased the level of fines to 500,000 manats."

Forum 18 reached the regional and town procurators' offices, as well as officials of the regional and town khyakimliks (administrations) but no officials were prepared to tell Forum 18 why such heavy fines were being handed down on the Baptists for meeting for worship in private homes.

The Balkanabad church - most of whose members are people surviving on invalidity benefits - has seen a wave of raids and threats this year, beginning in the spring. The fines in July and August came amid increased police action. In the wake of a raid during the Sunday service on 24 August, all those present were taken to the 6th division of the regional police department, the division that combats terrorism and religious extremism. They were threatened with fines every time they met for worship.

The procurator for Balkanabad, Berdy Shirjanov, tried to justify the fines on church members to Forum 18 on 29 August. He claimed that there is complete freedom of religion in Turkmenistan, but added that according to the country's law on religion every religious community has to register. He insisted that as the church refuses to do so, they had to fine the Baptists (see F18News 1 September 2003).

The Balkanabad congregation belongs to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists), which split from the All-Union Council of Baptists in 1961 when further state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates. According to one of its pastors in Moscow, it has 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

Turkmenistan has enacted one of the harshest systems of state control over religious life of any of the former Soviet republics. Under the highly restrictive 1996 religion law, only two religious faiths have been able to gain registration: communities of the state-approved Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. The government treats all other religious activity as illegal. Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Lutheran and other Protestant churches, as well as Shia Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna communities are among those whose activity is de facto banned and punishable under the administrative or criminal law.

Religious meetings have been raided (with a spate of raids against Protestant and Hare Krishna communities since May), places used for worship have been confiscated or demolished and believers have been beaten, fined, detained, deported and sacked from their jobs in punishment for religious activity the government does not like. Some believers have been given long prison sentences in recent years for their religious activity (all the current known prisoners are Jehovah's Witnesses) or have been sent into internal exile to remote parts of the country (see F18News 2 October 2003).

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