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TURKMENISTAN: Is publishing religious poetry a crime?

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

After Protestant Begjan Shirmedov tried to print copies of a small book of his religious poetry, a local religious affairs official waiting for him at the printing shop took him to the Police 6th Department, responsible for counter-terrorism and organised crime work. There the 74-year-old poet was questioned for six hours, forced to write a statement and banned from travelling outside his home region of Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan while his case is investigated, Protestants told Forum 18. Separately, other local Protestants in Dashoguz have been questioned over printing religious materials. It remains unclear if any will face charges. Turkmenistan imposes strict censorship on religious literature. Meanwhile, the appeal of Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Nuryllayev against his four-year prison sentence is due at Ashgabad City Court on 14 February. His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses vigorously deny charges he was "distributing pornography" and insist he is being punished for his faith. Seven other religious prisoners of conscience are known to be held.

An elderly Protestant Christian was held and questioned by police and a local state religious affairs official after trying to arrange through a local printing shop to print copies of a small book of his Christian poetry, fellow Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. The 74-year-old Begjan Shirmedov was held by Police in Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan for six hours on 3 February before being freed. In a separate case, several local Protestants were questioned over the printing of materials for a Christian meeting. It remains unclear if any of them will face further action. Meanwhile, the appeal hearing for Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Nuryllayev has been set for the morning of 14 February at Ashgabad City Court, fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They insist the four-year prison sentence handed down in January was fabricated and designed to punish him for his faith.

No officials were prepared to comment on any of these cases. The man who answered the phone on 8 February at the Dashoguz Region Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask why people were being investigated for wanting to print religious materials.

The man who answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], similarly put the phone down on 8 February as soon as Forum 18 began to put its questions.

The man who answered the telephone the same day of Fr Andrei Sapunov, a Russian Orthodox priest and another Deputy Chair of the Gengesh with responsibility for Christian communities (including non-Orthodox communities), repeatedly told Forum 18 the same day that it was a wrong number.

The woman who answered the phone on 8 February of the secretary of Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, Director of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in Ashgabad, told Forum 18 it was a wrong number.

Trying to print religious poetry

Shirmedov, a member of a Protestant church in Dashoguz which has long been seeking state registration in vain, has been writing Christian poetry in Turkmen for some years, Protestants told Forum 18. Wanting to have some of them printed so that he could give copies away, he went to a local printing shop. Knowing the authorities' sensitivity over religious literature, he told the printing shop staff that the poetry was religious and asked if this would be a problem. They insisted it would not.

When Shirmedov returned to the printing shop on 3 February hoping to collect copies, an official of the Regional Gengesh, Hudainazar (last name unknown), was waiting for him. The official took Shirmedov to the Police's 6th Department, which is notionally responsible for counter-terrorism and organised crime work. There officers questioned Shirmedov for six hours and forced him to write a statement. He stressed in the statement that he had been careful to check with the printing house whether printing religious literature was permitted before placing his order.

Police told Shirmedov that he is not allowed to leave Dashoguz Region while the investigation continues. It remains unclear if any charges will be brought against him and what he is being investigated for.

Shirmedov's church, Path of Faith Baptist Church, again tried to find out in January why its registration application has languished unanswered for many years. About forty church members who travelled to the resort of Avaza on the Caspian Sea for an August 2011 holiday were detained, questioned and insulted by the police and the local imam because of their faith. They were forced to abandon their holiday (see F18News 5 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1609).

One of Shirmedov's sons, Merdan, who had married a US citizen, was barred from leaving Turkmenistan in January 2007 to be reunited with his wife and to be present for the birth of their first baby, who was born in May 2007. The exit ban was lifted in July 2007 (see F18News 31 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1013).

Separate printing investigation

A separate investigation is also underway in Dashoguz against members of another local Protestant church for printing materials in late 2011 for use at a Christian meeting, Protestants told Forum 18. Several church members have already been interrogated.

It remains unclear whether any charges have been or are likely to be brought against church members.

Tight publishing controls

Turkmenistan retains tight controls on all publishing. Very few books are published in the country and few bookshops exist. Publishing of religious books is almost impossible. Publication of small Muslim pamphlets has only occasionally been allowed. Yet when a conference on a noted twelfth-century Sufi Muslim poet, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, was being planned for September 2010 in Ashgabad by the Academy of Sciences and the Makhtymguli Institute of Language and Literature, one of the organisers admitted to Forum 18 that none of his works were currently available in print in Turkmenistan (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1474).

Other faiths have even fewer possibilities. Turkmenistan remains the only former Soviet republic with no possibility for a Bible Society to even exist. (Bible Societies are organisations formed by Christian churches to translate and make available Bibles and associated materials.) The government has rejected repeated attempts by some of Turkmenistan's Christian churches to join together to form one.

Importing religious books is also almost impossible. Only occasionally have the few religious organisations able to get state registration been given permission by the Gengesh for Religious Affairs to do so. Even then, copies have been restricted to the number of members an individual community has.

The only religious community which appears to have been able to import religious literature and other items is the Russian Orthodox Church, which has about 12 parishes in the country. "We have been able to bring in several containers of literature and other items in the past few years," one priest told Forum 18. "We have a store at the Aleksandr Nevsky cathedral in Ashgabad and parishes can order supplies from there."

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, noted in February 2011 that Turkmen government controls on importing religious material had been lifted. He described the earlier restrictions on importing church article and literature as "a major problem" (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1551).

Religious literature is frequently confiscated from travellers from abroad, especially Turkmen residents returning from foreign visits (including Orthodox Christians). Such confiscations have included personal copies of the Koran or the Bible. Also known to have been confiscated are religious objects, including baptismal crosses, incense and Muslim prayer rugs (see F18News 25 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660).

Local religious believers have long complained about this state censorship of religious literature (see F18News 12 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294).

Appeal against four-year prison sentence

Nuryllayev, an Ashgabad-based Jehovah's Witness, was brought to the attention of the police in September 2011 by one of his relatives with whom he had come into conflict. The following month, police came to the flat he shares with other family members, and seized his religious literature. He was fined, but was not told what the fine was for. Two officials who claimed to be from the hyakimlik (local administration) then visited and – after beating him - seized his notebook computer. On 15 November 2011 he was arrested and taken to the pre-trial detention centre at Yashlyk, 40 kms (25 miles) south-east of Ashgabad.

Nuryllayev was accused of distributing pornography, an accusation fellow Jehovah's Witnesses vigorously rejected to Forum 18. On 18 January, Judge Iskander Bekdurdyev of Ashgabad's Azatlyk District Court sentenced Nuryllayev to four years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 164, Part 2. This Article punishes "production or distribution of pornographic items" more than once or by a group of people. The maximum penalty is five years' imprisonment (see F18News 25 January 2012

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660).

Jehovah's Witnesses complain that they knew nothing about the trial until after it had taken place. They also complain about the way it was conducted. "The Judge several times went up to his office to show pornographic recordings on Vladimir's computer," they told Forum 18. "Vladimir had to close his eyes and block his ears so as not to see or hear these abominations. He told them again that these recordings had never been on his computer earlier. Even the two witnesses he was alleged to have passed the recordings to weren't in court."

Jehovah's Witnesses pointed out that the computer is old and cannot connect to the internet, while the flash drive does not work. They insist the authorities must have used some technical skill to put the recordings on the computer.

Nuryllayev is awaiting his 14 February appeal hearing in Yashlyk detention centre.

Seven known religious prisoners of conscience in one labour camp

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Aziz Roziyev was freed from the labour camp in Seydi in the eastern Lebap Region on 4 February on completion of his prison term, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Originally from the town of Seydi near the labour camp, he had been sentenced in August 2010 to 18-months' imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience (see F18News 4 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495).

Roziyev's release leaves seven known religious prisoners of conscience in the Seydi camp. Six of them are Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors, all sentenced under Article 219, Part 1 of the Criminal Code. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment (see F18News 25 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660).

The seventh known religious prisoner of conscience is Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliyev, who leads Light to the World Protestant Church in the town of Mary east of Ashgabad. Arrested in August 2010, he was given a four-year labour camp term in October 2010 with "forcible medical treatment" on charges of swindling. His community insist the charges were fabricated to punish him for his religious activity (see F18News 22 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1525).

United Nations to examine Turkmenistan's record

The United Nations Human Rights Committee is set to examine Turkmenistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) at its meeting in New York on 15 and 16 March, the UN website notes. Article 18 of the ICCPR – to which Turkmenistan acceded in 1997 – guarantees the right freely to have or adopt a religion, to meet with others and engage in religious activity, such as "in worship, observance, practice and teaching".

Turkmenistan's restrictions on religious freedom have been repeatedly condemned by various UN bodies. Most recently, in December 2011 the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticised a range of restrictions, including the ban on meeting for worship in private homes, the ban on unregistered religious activity, the ban on non-clerics wearing religious garb in public and "undue registration criteria" which denied registration to many communities seeking to obtain it (see F18News 25 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660).

In February 2010, the then United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, and the Chair of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, El Hadji Malick Sow, wrote an "urgent appeal" to the Turkmen government about imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. In February 2011 Jahangir's successor, Heiner Bielefeldt, lamented the Turkmen government's failure to respond (see F18News 9 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1550). (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=1512.

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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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