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TURKMENISTAN: Lebap Region raids, confiscations, fines and public vilification

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two members of a Protestant community in a village in the eastern Lebap Region were fined more than two months' average local wages after police were informed that a church member was reading Christian literature at work, Protestants complained to Forum 18 News Service. State religious affairs officials (including state-appointed imams) and police raided several local Christians' homes, confiscating Bibles and other literature. "They said the Bible was printed in Kiev in Ukraine, and therefore reading it was banned," Protestants told Forum 18. The Judge told one of the fined church members: "If you want to know about God, read the Koran." In another village of Lebap Region, local elders wrote to Turkmenistan's President complaining that a Protestant leader is "very dangerous to society". Local Protestants have faced public vilification at residents' meetings. State religious affairs officials refused to comment.

Members of two separate Protestant Christian communities in villages in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region have faced pressure from local officials, including Muslim leaders who have a dual role as state religious affairs officials, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In one village, community members suffered raids, threats and confiscations of religious literature, including personal copies of the Bible. Two were fined more than two months' average local wages for those in work. In the other, community members were publicly vilified at meetings of local residents, with officials seeking help from President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to halt their activity locally and punish their leader.

Forum 18 reached the phone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad, several times on 16 May. As soon as Forum 18 introduced itself, the man who answered it immediately hung up.

Similarly, Forum 18 was unable to reach Yusup Durdyev, Imam of Lebap Region and simultaneously head of the regional Gengesh, or any other Gengesh official. Each time Forum 18 called the Gengesh on 16 May, the official who answered the phone hung up as soon as it introduced itself.

Government-appointed leaders of the Muftiate – which has a state-backed monopoly over Islamic life in Turkmenistan – also have a dual role as leaders of the Gengesh at national, regional and local level. Thus these leaders appointed to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of the Islamic community also have a state-appointed role to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of non-Muslim religious communities (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

The fines, raids, threats and public vilification of religious believers in Lebap Region come as religious communities continue to face difficulties inviting foreigners for religious visits. In early 2013, a foreigner was deported after visiting local fellow-believers. Despite all these violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, Turkmen officials insisted to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in April that the country upholds the right (see F18News 23 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1840).

Raids, threats, confiscations

Life has long been difficult for a Baptist community in the village of Galkynysh (formerly Deinau) in the eastern Lebap Region, close to the Amu Darya river half way between the regional capital Turkmenabad and Seydi. The most recent trouble started after a church member was caught reading a Christian book at work. Her boss was brought in and reported the woman to the authorities.

A Gengesh official for Lebap Region and the local police officer then visited the church member at her home in the village of Galkynysh on 2 March, local Protestants told Forum 18. They demanded she hand over all her religious books, threatening that they would otherwise search her home and seize them anyway. "They also intimidated her," Protestants added.

During intense questioning, the church member named another church member. The home of the second church member was then visited by the Galkynysh district imam, Yusup Setdarkuliev, and the district archyn, Batyr Novruzov. They too demanded that she

hand over her religious books. The imam and the archyn confiscated four books from her. They forced her to write a statement that she had received the books from local Baptist leader Narmurad Mominov.

Mominov was then summoned to the archynlyk (village administration) by an official of the Gengesh, the district imam, and three police officers, including the local police officer. They showed Mominov the statement identifying him as the alleged source of the books. They then showed him the 2003 Religion Law and said he had violated it. They demanded that he bring them all the religious literature he had.

Mominov told them he had a personal Bible and a personal Injil (New Testament). "They took these books and examined them, and immediately said they could not give them back as they don't have the required approval stamp from the Gengesh," Protestants complained to Forum 18. His computer was also seized.

Officials then took the personal Bible from another church leader, Rasul Jumayev. "They said the Bible was printed in Kiev in Ukraine, and therefore reading it was banned," Protestants added. "They refused to return it."

Religious literature is under tight state control. No religious literature may be published in Turkmenistan or imported into the country without permission from the Gengesh. Each title and the number of copies must be specifically approved. State postal authorities hold all religious literature received from abroad, releasing it only when the Gengesh has given written approval. The few books that are approved are stamped as approved by the Gengesh (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

Fines

Cases against the church members were then handed to Galkynysh District Court. They were accused of violating Code of Administrative Offences Article 205, Part 1 ("Rejection of registration by founders or leaders of religious groups and religious organisations with the state agency") and Part 2 ("Support for or participation in the activity of a religious group of religious organisation not officially registered in accordance with the legally established procedure"). Article 205 carries a punishment of fines of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage. Fines can be doubled for repeat offenders (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

At hearings on 3 March, Mominov and the female church member whose home was raided second were each fined 750 Manats (1,540 Norwegian Kroner, 205 Euros or 265 US Dollars). The Judge, R. Rozakova, told the female church member that reading such books was banned. "If you want to know about God, read the Koran," Protestants quoted the Judge as telling her. The Judge described her Protestant community as a "sect". Local police officer G. Bazarov insulted her "using bad language", Protestants complained to Forum 18.

Both Mominov and the female church member were told by Judge Rozakova and the District Gengesh official that meetings for worship are banned, as is reading Christian literature. "This is despite the fact that Narmurad Mominov has a certificate from the registered Baptist Church in Ashgabad that he has the right to lead services," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "But the officials said that this registration is not valid here."

The fines represent more than two months' average wages for those outside Turkmenistan's major cities who have jobs. Mominov and the other church member paid their fines, despite maintaining that they had done nothing wrong.

The female church member whose home was visited first was also summoned and told she would have to pay a similar fine. However, Protestants told Forum 18 that she was not fined.

Threats

Elsewhere in Lebap Region, Rahim Borjakov, leader of another Protestant Christian community, is facing pressure from local officials and Muslim leaders. He was summoned on 13 February to the Gengesh in his village of Dogry Yol (Bright Path) in Serdarabad District near the regional capital Turkmenabad.

There officials showed him a letter local elders had sent to President Berdymukhamedov warning that Borjakov is "very dangerous to society", local Protestants told Forum 18. The letter claimed that members of his church community had died in "difficult circumstances". They showed him the stamp on the letter from the Presidential Administration to show it had been received.

Forum 18 is not aware of any action that has resulted from the elders' letter to the President.

During the 13 February meeting, the village archyn warned Borjakov that his fate is in the hands of the people. "It is a question of time," he told him. Protestants fear he could be arrested in future.

Borjakov has been under intermittent surveillance, Protestants told Forum 18. Several times he and his family home were secretly

filmed from cars. On one occasion in the days after the 13 February meeting, Jennet Hamdamova, the deputy head of the village, was seen in a car waiting outside his home.

Vilification

Protestants complained that local officials are using the tragic deaths of two church members to warn local people against the church. One female church member was hit by a car and killed. Local imams insisted that she be buried according to Islamic ritual. Another female church member gave birth to a still-born child, but lost so much blood that she died. Church members lament what they regard as deliberate misuse of these tragedies to imply that church members are being punished by God for "abandoning" Islam.

Church members have long been publicly vilified by local officials, with several hostile meetings arranged in local settlements. At one public meeting in autumn 2012, held in the sports hall of School No. 14, the then Regional Imam Annaoraz Repov, the Deputy Hyakim (administration chief) responsible for culture Almagul Nazarova, the district imam, the village imam Azimov (first name unknown), the school head and all the teachers addressed about 200 local residents (see F18News 5 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1737).

Regional Imam Repov told residents that Christians are bad people who have betrayed their country, kill children and break up families, Protestants told Forum 18. Deputy Hyakim Nazarova said Christians should be identified so that they are not invited to funerals and weddings. Other speakers agreed, telling parents not to allow their children to mix with Christian children. When Borjakov tried to address the meeting he was shouted down. (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=1676.

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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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