

19 November 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Secret police close down mosque refusing to go against Islam

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

The State Security Ministry (MSS) (ex-KGB) has closed down a mosque for not putting the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), President Saparmurat Niyazov's spiritual writings, on the same stand as the Koran during Friday prayers to be filmed for TV, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Turkmen officials liken the Ruhnama to the Koran or the Bible, and it plays a large role in the President's personality cult, being compulsorily imposed on schools and the wider public. All large mosques are required to put the Ruhnama alongside the Koran during prayers. Forum 18 has learnt that mosque leaders refused to do this, saying it would contradict Islamic teachings to use books other than the Koran in prayers. The MSS interrogated the mosque leader, banned him from attending the mosque or to hold a position at another mosque, and closed down the mosque with locks on the doors. Many mosques and other places of worship have been closed by Turkmen authorities in the past five years.

Officers of the State Security Ministry (MSS) (the former KGB) closed down a Sunni mosque earlier this year because one of its leaders refused to put a copy of the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), President Saparmurat Niyazov's book of spiritual writings, on the same stand as the Koran during Friday prayers, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A leading member of the mosque was twice interrogated by the secret police for several days, sources told Forum 18. The sources insisted that neither the individual nor the mosque – nor the town in which it is located - be identified for fear of further reprisals against those concerned.

The Ruhnama, which officials have likened to the Koran or the Bible, plays a significant role in President Niyazov's massive cult of personality and is compulsorily imposed on schools and the wider public. All imams in large mosques are required to put the Ruhnama alongside the Koran during prayers and sources have told Forum 18 that most imams reluctantly comply for fear of being punished or jailed (see F18News 2 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151).

Trouble started for the mosque when a three-member television crew arrived during prayers and said they were to prepare a report about how the mosque was "abiding by state policy" and "supporting the current political system and the president's way". They explained that all they needed was to make a short video report of Friday prayers showing that the people in the mosque were using two books during prayers, the Koran and the Ruhnama.

The mosque leaders strongly refused to allow the report, declaring that it would contradict the teachings of Islam which prohibits the use of any materials other than the Koran while praying. Several days later, one leading member of the mosque was detained and taken to the MSS. There he was repeatedly questioned for three days about why he refused to allow the Ruhnama to be placed in the mosque. He was released only after he agreed to the report being made.

When the television crew arrived at the mosque again to film the report, the leaders provided a special place for them to put the Ruhnama in another part of the room. However, the television crew insisted that the Koran and the Ruhnama must be side by side. The mosque leaders refused, insisting that they could not put anything alongside the Koran and could not pray to it. They also refused to use any words during prayers that were not from the Koran (mosques are required to incorporate prayers for President Niyazov into regular prayers). The mosque leaders told the television crew they would agree to the television report only if they could specify where the Ruhnama would be placed. No agreement was reached and the television crew left.

The MSS then detained the mosque leader again and interrogated him for several days. Officers banned him from attending the mosque in future, or to hold any position at any other mosque. They then closed down the mosque, putting locks on the doors, and it remains closed.

The mosque leaders reportedly argued among themselves whether to accede to state pressure to place the Ruhnama in the mosque with equal prominence to the Koran. Some argued that it is just a book and formally does not contain anything anti-Islamic, maintaining that local believers will suffer now that the mosque is closed. Others argued that accepting such a clear contradiction of their Islamic faith should not even be considered.

"The mosque leader is a very intelligent person who knows Arabic and has a high school diploma," one source told Forum 18. "He is

a strong believer in Islam and did everything in his power to develop the mosque, spending his own money to repair it and buying books to interest the people and their children in the true Islamic faith. The mosque was very popular, because it was built up on believers' money and not with government money, like many other mosques in Turkmenistan." The mosque was respected especially for its education work with children.

Forum 18 has learnt that the mosque leader still has to report to the MSS several times a month, although he has made it absolutely clear he is not involved in any wider political opposition to President Niyazov. However, MSS officers continue to pressure him to accept the Ruhnama in the mosque.

Murad Karryev, deputy head of the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, reported in early November that there are some 395 registered mosques in Turkmenistan (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180). Many more, especially Shia mosques, have been closed down by the authorities in the past five years.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY