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TURKMENISTAN: Torture and jail for one 4 year and 14 short-term prisoners of conscience

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov has been tortured and given a four-year prison term on 19 May in Turkmenistan's eastern city of Turkmenabad, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Prisoner of conscience Hemdemov was accused of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses deny. His real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship. Along with Hemdemov and many of the latest 2015 short-term prisoners of conscience, Hemdemov's son Serdar was jailed for 15 days as a prisoner of conscience and tortured. A total of 14 Jehovah's Witnesses have since February been short-term prisoners of conscience, with one of these still today (21 May) being detained. About 30 others have been fined. Tortures used include beatings with bottles of water and electrocution threats. The children of Protestants and their parents have been subjected to public bullying in schools and pressure to sign statements renouncing their faith. Protestant teachers have been fired from their jobs and summer camps for children cancelled.

Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov has been tortured and given a four-year prison term on 19 May in Turkmenistan's eastern city of Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat, formerly Charjew], Forum 18 News Service has been told. Prisoner of conscience Hemdemov was punished on criminal charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses insisted to Forum 18 he is innocent of. His real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship with his fellow believers.

Along with Hemdemov and many of the latest 2015 short-term prisoners of conscience, Hemdemov's son Serdar was also jailed for 15 days as a prisoner of conscience and tortured (see below).

The imprisonment of Turkmenistan's latest prisoner of conscience came after many arrests in Turkmenabad since February of Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Many detainees were tortured and subsequently sentenced to 15 day terms of imprisonment, some of them more than once. "Only one of the victims has been provided with a court decision, which found him guilty under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 345 ("Minor hooliganism")", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 21 May.

Raids and punishments aimed at most important commemoration?

A number of those imprisoned for 15 days were in prison on 3 April, when Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide mark their most important annual observance, the Memorial of Christ's Death. Similar raids apparently timed to coincide with this important commemoration in the past against the community in Turkmenabad and other places, for example in 2007 (see F18News 20 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=997).

Raids and punishments targeted against Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have continued. In March 2014, Turkmenabad Jehovah's Witnesses faced raids which led to 10 15-day jail terms and two fines. Raids on this community were repeated in June (see F18News 12 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2047).

Criminal charges, violence, four-year jail sentence

Criminal charges were brought against prisoner of conscience Hemdemov after a raid on his Turkmenabad home during a meeting for worship on 14 March (see below). Charges were lodged against him under Criminal Code Article 177, Part 2 ("Inciting social, ethnic or religious hatred using mass media"). These charges carry a maximum prison term of four years.

Police confiscated Hemdemov's personal possessions, including his car, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Since his detention, officers have repeatedly interrogated and tortured Hemdemov.

Jehovah's Witnesses identified a Turkmenabad-based Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officer Mekan Veliyev as one of those who participated in the torture of Hemdemov. He also participated in the torture of at least six local Jehovah's Witnesses since the raids and detentions began in February 2015.

It is suspected by local Jehovah's Witnesses that Mekan Veliyev may not be the real name of this MSS officer. Forum 18 was unable to reach Veliyev to find out if and why he was involved in torturing people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Following his arrest, prisoner of conscience Hemdemov was placed in pre-trial detention. "Despite their best efforts, Hemdemov's relatives were unable to obtain any information about the charges against him, nor were they permitted to provide him with food or other necessary supplies," Jehovah's Witnesses stated.

On 19 May, two days before his 52nd birthday, Hemdemov was sentenced by Judge Gochmurad Charyev at Lebap Regional Court to the maximum four years' imprisonment under Article 177, Part 2. The Judge also ruled that Hemdemov's property should be confiscated, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The telephones of Turkmenabad Police were not answered each time Forum 18 called on 21 May. Officials who answered the phones of the Regional and City Religious Affairs Departments in Turkmenabad declined to discuss anything with Forum 18. Those answering the telephones at the former Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] said the numbers did not relate to the Gengesh.

Torture frequently used by authorities

Torture and violence, including violence apparently ordered by the government, is frequently used by the authorities. This includes against the relatives and friends of 15 then-current and former conscientious objector prisoners who appealed to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee between September 2012 and August 2013 against their imprisonment and maltreatment. The prisoners of conscience were in Seydi Labour Camp regularly subjected to spells in the punishment cell and some were brutally tortured (see F18News 21 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1940). After the UN sought information from the government about the complaints, the home of a prisoner was raided in January 2013 and individuals were tortured, threatened with rape and fined (see F18News 14 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1801).

In February 2015 Muslim prisoners convicted of alleged "Wahhabism" were subjected in the Seydi Labour Camp to brutal torture, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. One man suffered a broken hand, while another suffered a broken rib and damage to his lung (see F18News 18 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2039).

In 2011 the UN Committee against Torture found that, in Turkmenistan "persons deprived of their liberty are tortured, ill-treated and threatened by public officers, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, to extract confessions and as an additional punishment after the confession" (see UN reference CAT/C/TKM/CO/1 <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ef0540f2.html>).

First February raid, violence, 3 short-term prisoners of conscience

The most recent series of raids on Turkmenabad's Jehovah's Witnesses began on 6 February, when police or the MSS secret police arrested Viktor Yarygin, Rustam Nazarov, Charygeldy Jumaev and Jamilya Adylova. Three of them – Nazarov, Jumaev and Adylova - were tortured by MSS secret police officer Veliyev, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Jumaev was tortured so severely that he lost consciousness three times during the physical attacks."

All four were brought before Judge Gulnaz Jumaniyazova at Turkmenabad City Court on 6 February. She found all four guilty under Administrative Code Article 345 ("Minor hooliganism"), she told Forum 18. Nazarov, Jumaev and Adylova were given sentences of 15 days' imprisonment, the maximum term of imprisonment under Article 345. "Yarygin is a pensioner, so I fined him 100 Manats [about 216 Norwegian Kroner, 26 Euros, or 29 US Dollars]." This is about half the average monthly salary for collective farm workers.

Adylova and Jumaev were each sentenced to three separate terms of 15 days' imprisonment. The first imprisonment was from 6 to 21 February, the second from 16 to 31 March, and the third from 31 March to 15 April.

Jailed for asking for a written copy of court decision

On 2 April, Nazarov went to the trial court to receive a copy of the written decision. However, once at the court, Judge Jumaniyazova sentenced him to a second term of 15 days' imprisonment. She claimed to Forum 18 that Nazarov had shouted in the court, insulting court officials and threatening to kill all of them. "He was shouting in the corridor," she insisted. "I heard it, everyone here heard it." Police were called, he was arrested and she sentenced him again under Article 345.

However, Jehovah's Witnesses denied on 21 May that Nazarov insulted or shouted in the court. Contrary to Judge Jumaniyazova's claims, they state that she was irritated that Nazarov was so persistent in asking for a copy of the court decision. The Judge then decided to illegally punish him with another 15-day jail term.

Judge Jumaniyazova totally denied that the punishments, including the jailing of prisoner of conscience Nazarov, were related to the four individuals' exercise of their freedom of religion or belief. "It was not because of their religion," she claimed. "They argued with police officers and violated social order."

The four filed formal complaints over their treatment with the Presidential Administration and the General Prosecutor's Office in Ashgabad.

Second February and March raid, 8 short-term prisoners of conscience, 30 fines

On 20 February, Turkmenabad Police conducted what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as an "illegal" search of the home of Zeynep Husaynova and her son Tohtabay Husaynov. Officers confiscated all personal religious literature they could find. The police threatened to prosecute Husaynova under the Administrative Code for possessing "illegal" religious literature and sentence her to 15 days' imprisonment.

The third and most serious raid came on 14 March. Turkmenabad Police raided the Hemdemov family home, where 38 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for worship. The police confiscated all the religious literature they could find and took everyone to the police station. All were detained until the early morning hours.

All 38 Jehovah's Witnesses were brought before Judge Gurdov at Serdarabad District Court, where they were convicted under the Administrative Code in two trials, Judge Jumaniyazova told Forum 18. Eight were sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment each. A further 30 were fined, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Religious literature is under tight state censorship. The Gengesh must approve any religious literature before it is used. Gengesh officials stamp copies of books they have approved. Literature without such a stamp is liable to confiscation and individuals can be subject to punishment (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

"Particularly brutal treatment", torture by electrocution threat

Prisoner of conscience Emirjan Jumanazarov was "singled out for particularly brutal treatment", Jehovah's Witnesses complain. On 16 March he was convicted under the Administrative Code for alleged "disorderly conduct" (apparently under Article 345) and sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment.

"While in prison, Jumanazarov was tortured, including by being beaten, kicked and subjected to obscene insults by law enforcement officials, including MSS officer Mekan Veliyev," fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Jumanazarov was also threatened with torture by electrocution." Under threat of torture, officers forced him to sign a statement claiming that he had been detained for an identification check because he had "aimlessly strolled about the streets".

On 1 April, Jumanazarov was again convicted and given 15 days' imprisonment for "disorderly conduct". It was claimed that while "preaching teachings of an unregistered religious organisation" he had "insulted" an officer who had stopped him.

"In total, Jumanazarov was subjected to 35 days of imprisonment," Jehovah's Witnesses note.

30 days' jail and torture for prisoner of conscience

Jehovah's Witnesses also expressed concern over the treatment of another of those imprisoned, 19-year-old Serdar Hemdemov (son of the homeowner Bahram Hemdemov). He was tortured and repeatedly interrogated by the police, including by MSS secret police officer Veliyev and a Muslim cleric.

On 16 March, he was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment under the Administrative Code. During the imprisonment he was interrogated three times. "Once he was kicked by the police and tortured with plastic bottles filled with water," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

On 31 March, Serdar Hemdemov was convicted again under the Administrative Code for "disorderly conduct" and sentenced to a further 15 days' imprisonment. During the second imprisonment he was interrogated on three separate occasions. On 17 April, he was placed in isolation and severely tortured.

Three consecutive 15 day prison terms, with torture

Turkmenabad Police also detained Jehovah's Witness Dovlet Kandymov on 18 March. He was subsequently sentenced to two successive sentences of 15 days' imprisonment under the Administrative Code. He should have been released at the end of his second sentence on 16 April. However, on 18 April he was sentenced to a third term of 15 days' imprisonment based on an allegation by police that they had received "a complaint from his wife".

While in jail, prisoner of conscience Kandymov was repeatedly physically tortured by MSS secret police officer Veliyev to force him to testify against prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov, Jehovah's Witness stated.

Two more short-term prisoners of conscience, more torture

On the evening of 18 April, Turkmenabad Police detained Dovlet Byashimov when he was leaving his house. He was released on 26 April.

On 6 May, Police detained Konstantin Vlaskin while walking on the street. The police then accompanied him to his home where they physically tortured him and his sister, Aleksandra. Officers confiscated his religious literature and computer. Vlaskin is still today (21 May) in detention.

Both Byashimov and Vlaskin are former prisoners of conscience. Vlaskin was held for 15 days in 2005 to punish him for his exercise of freedom of religion or belief and was also tortured then by police (see F18News 13 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=649). Byashimov served 18 months' imprisonment from 2010 for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. He too was tortured in custody (see F18News 16 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1668).

Official bullying of schoolchildren, teachers fired

The 2014-5 school year has seen increased public bullying and other actions against children who belong to religious communities the authorities do not like, sources told Forum 18.

In September 2014, at the start of the school year, at least some Ashgabad schools required parents and children to sign statements that the children would not attend religious organisations, several Ashgabad parents told Forum 18. "As this contradicts the law, we refused to sign," one parent told Forum 18. "We didn't suffer for not signing. It was all done to create tension for us."

In one village secondary school, photos of children of members of a local Protestant church were hung on the school's bulletin board, the Christian human rights charity Open Doors noted, without identifying the school or location. "Children of parent sectarians, so be aware and vigilant!" a caption to the photos warned. "All of the records of these children are placed in the school headteacher's office as if these children are especially dangerous due to their parents' religious beliefs," Open Doors added.

Such official bullying of children and their parents has also taken place in the past, using tactics such as hostile public meetings at which people are told to ostracise Christians (see eg. F18News 17 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1836). Children have also been subjected to marks being lowered and ridicule by teachers in class (see eg. F18News 5 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1737).

Several Protestants who worked as school teachers were fired from their jobs in 2014, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They asked that the individuals and locations not be identified.

Protestants who held state jobs – the state is the largest employer in the country – have also been fired in the past for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Those fired have included teachers, airline cabin staff, and doctors (see eg. F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1474).

Summer camp, youth conference banned

The Baptist church in Mary, east of Ashgabad, was ordered to cancel its summer camp for local children in 2014. Church members went to the head of the Regional Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, who is also the Regional Imam.

The state appoints all senior officials of the country's Muslim administration, like the Regional Imam. Such officials all have a second role as Gengesh officials tasked with restricting freedom of religion or belief. This means that the state-appointed leaders of one faith control the state-permitted activities of all other faiths, including whether their communities are allowed to exist (see eg. F18News 25 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1805).

The Imam demanded documentation of the proposed summer camp from the Baptist church. Church members handed over the documentation. A little while later, they received a telephone call from the Gengesh prohibiting them from holding the summer camp, Protestants told Forum 18.

Police raided the same church's summer camp in June 2013, and summer camps organised by other churches have also been raided (see eg. F18News 29 August 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1869).

Similarly, the Baptist Union was ordered to abandon a conference of young people from across the country, planned to be held in

Ashgabad in February 2015, Protestants told Forum 18. "When the authorities learned that this youth conference was being planned, the church got a call from the Gengesh telling it not to go ahead," one Ashgabad Protestant told Forum 18. (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.

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