

26 September 2016

TURKMENISTAN: Imprisoned Muslim leader – alive or dead?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Bahram Saparov led a Hanafi Sunni Muslim community in Turkmenabad. He and about 20 members of his group were given long prison sentences in May 2013. He and at least two others were transferred to the top-security Ovadan-Depe prison, where torture is frequent and prisoners are held incommunicado.

One of the many Muslims imprisoned in Turkmenistan - apparently to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief - is Bahram Saparov. As of 2014, he was being held incommunicado in Turkmenistan's top-security Ovadan-Depe prison in the desert north of the capital Ashgabad, a fellow Muslim told Forum 18. Two of the others sentenced with him are known also to have been there at the same time. However, as the unit where he and other prisoners accused of being "Wahhabis" is closed, no news has been heard of him - or the other two - since then. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if Saparov and the others are still alive.

Saparov was married with three children and would now be 34 years old (he was born on 31 May 1982). He led a Hanafi Sunni Muslim community in the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjew) in Lebap Region until his imprisonment in March 2013. About 20 others were sentenced to long prison terms with him but, apart from the two others known also to have been in Ovadan-Depe prison in 2014, Forum 18 has been unable to discover if they are imprisoned and, if so, where they are.

There has been international concern over whether or not more than 80 other prisoners in Turkmenistan are still alive or have died – and if dead how they died (see <http://www.nhc.no/en/enforced-disappearances-in-turkmen-prisons-must-be-stopped/>).

In a separate case, another Muslim from Turkmenabad, Renat Bektemirov, was imprisoned in 2008 for sharing his faith with others and questioning the preaching of the Regional Mufti. He was first given a five-year prison term, but a further seven-year term was later added while he was already in prison. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if he is still imprisoned (see below).

Another Muslim reportedly imprisoned for exercising freedom of religion or belief died in labour camp near Turkmenabad in 2013. Atageldi aga was imam of an unregistered Sunni Muslim mosque in the Khitrovka district of Ashgabad until his 2008 arrest (see below).

Court officials have refused to give Forum 18 any specific details of these cases.

Muslim possible prisoners of conscience

Only sparse information has emerged in recent years of Muslims imprisoned for their religious activity who might be prisoners of conscience.

Musa (last name unknown), a Muslim from Ashgabad who seems to have been imprisoned for teaching the Koran to children, was being held in the general regime labour camp at Seydi in Lebap Region at the beginning of 2012 (see F18News 20 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1669).

Five Muslim men imprisoned on charges of religious extremism, who arrived in Seydi strict regime labour camp in February 2015, were severely beaten on arrival. Forum 18 was unable to establish if they – and a group of about 10 Muslim men transferred from that labour camp to the top-security prison in Ovadan-Depe in December 2014 – are prisoners of conscience (see F18News 18 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2039).

Known Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience

Two Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are currently known to be imprisoned for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The 32-year-old Jehovah's Witness Mansur Masharipov was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on 18 August in the northern city of Dashoguz for allegedly assaulting a police officer back in July 2014, charges he denies. Following his 2014 arrest, he was

tortured. He escaped from a Drug Rehabilitation Centre where he was being injected with unknown drugs that harmed his health. He was re-arrested in Ashgabad in June 2016 before being transferred back to Dashoguz for trial (see F18News 21 September 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2217).

The 53-year-old Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov is serving a four-year sentence handed down in May 2015 on charges of inciting religious hatred, charges he denies. He is being held in the general regime section of the Seydi Labour Camp (see F18News 5 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196).

In addition to those imprisoned for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, the authorities regularly hand down corrective labour sentences to those unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. The men must live at home under restrictions and a fifth of their wages are confiscated by the state.

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dayanch Jumayev was sentenced in Ashgabad in February 2016 to one year of corrective labour (see F18News 5 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196). Five further Jehovah's Witness young men are known to have been given conditional or corrective labour sentences between February and August 2016 (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

Prisoners subjected to torture

Prisoners generally have to endure harsh conditions, especially for those unable or unwilling to pay bribes to secure access to reasonable living quarters, food or washing facilities. Torture of prisoners is widespread.

In 2011 the United Nations (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>).

Under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Turkmenistan is obliged to arrest and try under criminal law any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

In March and October 2015 the UN Human Rights Committee found that Turkmenistan had violated the rights of four further Jehovah's Witness young men by imprisoning them for refusing compulsory religious service on grounds of religious conscience. The Committee also ruled that beatings and other maltreatment (such as a head being repeatedly bashed against a wall) of Zafar Abdullayev, Mahmud Hudaybergenov, Ahmet Hudaybergenov and Sunnet Japparov is torture and the government needs to provide reparations (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

The UN Human Rights Committee adopted five further decisions in July 2016 that Turkmenistan had violated the rights of five more Jehovah's Witness former prisoners of conscience, including by the use of torture against them (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

The government has failed to provide any reparations to the victims.

Turkmenabad: home meetings to study Islam

Bahram Saparov led a small group of young people in his home city of Turkmenabad from 2007 eager to learn more about Hanafi Sunni Islam. He organised meetings in homes to study the five pillars of Islam and the attitude of Islam to the family and neighbours, one Muslim familiar with his work told Forum 18. Up to 10 young people initially joined the group, but it later grew to about 60 people in two groups.

In his teaching Saparov used Islamic books which had been approved by muftis, including Abu Zakariya's "Gardens of the Righteous" and the works of the Moscow Imam Shamil Alyautdinov.

In 2009, Saparov organised the first of what he called a "Muslim wedding". Men and women would gather separately and no alcohol was served. "This was very unusual there," the Muslim explained to Forum 18. "This is why people started calling Bahram a Wahhabi."

"Wahhabi" is a common term in Central Asia not just for anyone who follows the purist form of Islam which predominates in Saudi Arabia but for any Muslims who follow a traditional form of Islam. It often has pejorative connotations, especially when used by officials.

Many of the young men who joined Saparov's study group were sportsmen who trained in local gyms. Saparov gained a reputation locally for defending people whose rights were undefended by others, the Muslim told Forum 18.

Much later, after the mass arrest of Saparov and other group members, a few of the rest fled to Turkey, where several reportedly travelled to join the ISIS terrorist group.

However, Forum 18 has not been able to find evidence that Saparov and members of his group violated the human rights of others or called for such violations. Nor has Forum 18 found evidence that Saparov encouraged his fellow Muslims to join terrorist groups.

Turkmenabad: secret police retaliation for home meetings

Saparov and members of his group soon came to the attention of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. In 2008 and 2009, MSS officers frequently summoned them individually for interrogation.

One officer would be polite, but when he had left a second officer would arrive who would beat or kick them in the face. "We don't want to see you in the mosque again," the second MSS officer reportedly told them. The first officer would then return, innocently asking what had happened to the individual's face and insisting there was no problem if they continued to attend the mosque.

The MSS secret police even detained and tortured a young man on his wedding day in about 2009, the Muslim told Forum 18.

Later the MSS secret police reportedly encouraged local criminals to attack members of Saparov's group, hoping that if they fought back this would provide an easy opportunity to punish them, the Muslim added.

Turkmenabad: Mass arrests and trial

In March 2013, police or MSS secret police arrested Saparov and about 20 other members of the Muslim groups he led. The MSS secret police seized Saparov's computer and studied the entire contents of the hard drive, the Muslim told Forum 18. Five of the other men arrested (and subsequently sentenced with Saparov) were Adylbek, Meylis, Atajan, Kamiljan (who went by the Muslim name Hamza) and Allaberdi (last names unknown).

No one at any of the police telephone numbers in Turkmenabad Forum 18 reached on 26 September 2016 was willing to comment on the arrests of Saparov and his fellow Muslims.

In May 2013 Saparov and about 20 others were tried in closed hearings at Lebap Regional Court in Turkmenabad, a court official confirmed to Forum 18 on 26 September. The official explained that cases with serious charges are heard not in city courts but in regional courts. However, the official refused to say how many defendants were on trial, what the charges were and what the sentences were. "This is secret information," the official insisted.

During the trial the court had a live videolink to Ashgabad, from where the result of the hearing was dictated. Charges reportedly included fighting and trade in drugs, allegations the Muslim insisted to Forum 18 were fabricated. Forum 18 has been unable to establish what any other charges might have been, nor what specific Articles of the Criminal Code were used. All were sentenced to long prison terms.

Forum 18 has been unable to establish if any of those sentenced lodged any appeals and, if so, what the result was.

Ovadan-Depe: Closed top-security prison

Saparov, Adylbek and Meylis, and possibly some or all of the others sentenced with them, were then transferred to the isolated top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe (Picturesque Hill) in the Karakum desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Saparov, Adylbek and Meylis, and possibly some or all of the others, were imprisoned there in the blocks reserved for prisoners the authorities describe as "Wahhabis".

About 120 men accused of being "Wahhabis" were being held in the seventh and eighth blocks at Ovadan-Depe in 2014, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 24 August 2014. Like political prisoners held in a separate part of the desert prison, "Wahhabis" are banned from receiving parcels or visits from relatives, it added (see F18News 18 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2039).

An individual who saw Saparov in the prison in 2014 – the last time he is known to have been alive – barely recognised him. "Bahram's face – and the faces of the other prisoners in the block – were unrecognisable because of the beatings," one source told Forum 18. "Officers in uniform came weekly from Ashgabad in helmets and riot gear and beat the prisoners." Adylbek and Meylis were also seen alive in the prison about the same time in 2014.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the leadership of the top-security prison in Ovadan-Depe as no telephone numbers for it are made public.

Turkmenabad: Reprisals and fear

Following the sentencing, relatives of Saparov and other members of the group were sacked from their jobs.

Other group members became very frightened after the arrests, the Muslim told Forum 18. Those who dared to continue attending Friday prayers at state-controlled mosques stopped greeting each other and left as soon as prayers were over.

Police detained one former member of the group in 2014 even though he had – apparently out of fear - stopped praying publicly following the mass arrests. Officers shaved off his beard and forced him to eat pork and drink alcohol.

Turkmenabad: 2008 arrest in mosque

In a separate case, an ethnic Tatar from Turkmenabad, Renat Bektemirov, was imprisoned in 2008 to punish him for talking to others of his faith. Bektemirov, who was then about 45, was a familiar figure with a beard and dressed in Islamic clothes preaching from about 2007 in the market. The MSS secret police arrested and tortured him, a Muslim familiar with his activity told Forum 18.

Bektemirov used to attend Turkmenabad's central Abu-Yusuf Mosque. One week, he told the state-appointed Regional Imam after Friday prayers that he was not preaching well and was wrong to preach from the Ruhnama, the book written by the former president Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in 2006. Bektemirov told the Regional Imam he would answer for his preaching before Allah.

One Friday in summer 2008, Bektemirov stood up to ask a question in the Mosque just before Friday prayers were due to begin. He asked the imam why he did not preach against pornographic films that people were watching on their mobile phones.

The MSS secret police arrested Bektemirov immediately in the Mosque. He was then tried and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Forum 18 has been unable to find out what charges Bektemirov was sentenced under, nor whether he appealed against the sentence.

When he was already serving his sentence, a further sentence of seven years' imprisonment was added, another Muslim who knows him told Forum 18. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if Bektemirov is still imprisoned.

Ashgabad: Imam's 2008 arrest

Atageldi aga was imam of a Sunni Mosque which functioned without state permission in Khitrovka, a poor district in north-eastern Ashgabad. The Imam was particularly known for teaching Islam to children, an individual familiar with his work told Forum 18.

Imam Atageldi aga was arrested in mid-September 2008, about two days after an armed clash between a local gang and security forces in which many were killed on both sides. The individual familiar with his work insisted to Forum 18 he had not been involved in the gang.

Forum 18 has been unable to establish if Atageldi aga was the mullah whose arrest was noted by Nurberdi Nurammedov, a founder of the unregistered opposition party Agzybirlik (Unity), who lived in Khitrovka. He told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service in September 2008 that police had detained the unnamed local mullah after a local resident had invited him to lead a traditional end of fast meal in early September 2008 at the beginning of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Prosecutors accused Imam Atageldi aga of organising an attempted coup. At his trial at Ashgabad City Court, the Judge sentenced him to 20 years' imprisonment in a strict regime labour camp, the individual told Forum 18. His family appealed to the Supreme Court, but this rejected the appeal.

Forum 18 was unable to establish what Criminal Code Articles Imam Atageldi aga was sentenced under. The chancellery at Ashgabad City Court confirmed to Forum 18 on 26 September that its database does contain case records dating back to 2008 and 2009, but insisted that it could give no information by telephone. Telephones at the Supreme Court went unanswered when Forum 18 called the same day.

"The authorities claim Ali had called for an uprising, but this is not true," the individual insisted to Forum 18. "He never did anyone any harm. He taught Islam to children – that is why he was imprisoned."

Seydi: Prisoner died in labour camp in 2013

Following his sentencing, Imam Atageldi aga was transferred from Investigation Prison to the strict-regime labour camp at Seydi in the desert in the eastern Lebap Region. His family were reportedly never allowed to visit him in labour camp or send him food or clothing parcels.

Imam Atageldi aga died in Seydi strict-regime labour camp in 2013 at the age of about 50. His body was never returned to relatives

for a funeral. Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether the death was from natural causes, such as a pre-existing medical condition, or from neglect or maltreatment in the labour camp. (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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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY