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TURKMENISTAN: Religious prisoners of conscience

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Although it is difficult because of the level of persecution to be precise, all the religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan known to Forum 18 News Service are from the Jehovah's Witness and Islamic faiths. Some Baptists are currently in hiding from the danger of imprisonment for their faith as, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, they have refused on religious grounds to perform military service. The most high profile current prisoner is the former chief mufti, and Baptists have in the recent past also been imprisoned for their faith. It is also reliably believed that several other muftis have been sent into internal exile without trial.

Today in Turkmenistan, the known religious prisoners of conscience are from the Jehovah's Witness and Islamic faiths, and some Baptists are currently in hiding from the danger of imprisonment for their faith. Because of the level of persecution, it is difficult to be precise about numbers, or to confirm information. For example, the names of five of the six Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience had previously been withheld by Jehovah's Witnesses, for fear that they or their families might suffer further victimisation. However, the following cases are known to Forum 18 News Service.

There are currently six Jehovah's Witnesses in prison. Five of the six have been sentenced for refusing the compulsory military service (Turkmenistan has no alternative to military service), while the sixth prisoner – Kurban Zakirov - is serving an eight-year sentence on what the Jehovah's Witnesses insist are trumped-up charges. Forum 18 notes that, together with former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271), sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment at a closed trial in the capital Ashgabad on 2 March, these are Turkmenistan's known religious prisoners.

It is believed several muftis have been sent into internal exile without trial.

The exiled human rights group Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported in April that three unnamed Baptists who told the military conscription office that they were not prepared to conduct military service on religious grounds, but were refused any non-military service have now gone into hiding to avoid arrest.

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that the latest of their conscientious objectors is 23-year-old Aleksandr Matveyev, who received a two year sentence on 4 December 2003. The other four imprisoned conscientious objectors – all sentenced to one and a half years' imprisonment in May 2003 - are 23-year-old Rinat Babadjanov from the north-eastern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz], Shohrat Mitogorov (who turned 21 in April), Ruslan Nasyrov (who was 19 last November) and Rozymamed Satlykov (who will be 21 in June). All five are serving their sentences in the minimum security labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi.

"All these young men, some of them not yet baptised as Jehovah's Witnesses, have been put under enormous pressure to compromise their religious convictions and to give the oath of allegiance on the Koran," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Currently they are totally isolated from the surrounding society and no visitors are allowed."

The 24-year-old Zakirov is being held in the strict-regime prison in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk). He was originally arrested in April 1999 for refusing military service. He was sentenced the following month to one year's imprisonment, but was given an extra eight-year sentence in spring 2000 accused of assaulting a prison guard (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=247).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that their prisoners are intimidated in an effort to get them to renounce their faith. They are mocked with: "You'll live your whole life in prison," and "we will taunt you until you die." They are also threatened with rape and other bodily injury and some of these threats have been carried out. "Insults and public beatings compound the existing poor conditions," they add.

More than two months after his trial, the authorities have still not made public the charges under which the former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was sentenced. Although previously loyal to Turkmenistan's autocratic president Saparmurat Niyazov (who calls himself "Turkmenbashi" or "Father of the Turkmens"), he fell out of favour after the mysterious assassination attempt on the

president in November 2002. The president ousted him from his religious and his state job at the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in January 2003 (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

There are persistent rumours that a number of other muftis, who have fallen out of official favour, have been banished to remote places.

One of the most prominent religious prisoners of recent years was the Baptist Shageldy Atakov, sentenced in 1999 on fraud charges which the Baptists insisted were brought to punish him for his religious activity. He was freed early from his sentence in January 2002 after worldwide pressure. A less well-known Baptist prisoner, Geldy Khudaikuliev, who was arrested on 15 December 2003, was freed on 20 December after international pressure (see F18News 22 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=219). No Christians are currently known to be imprisoned for their faith.

Meanwhile, the 78-year-old Muslim writer Rahim Esenov, released from prison on 9 March after 13 days' detention, hopes that threatened charges against him will quietly be forgotten. "They have not been dropped as far as I know and I've been told the investigation is continuing, but the case has gone quiet," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 29 April. "They've gone quiet and I've been quiet."

In a bizarre case, the authorities were annoyed that in his historical novel on the sixteenth century regent of the Mughal Empire, Bayram Khan, he depicted him (correctly) as a Shia rather than a Sunni Muslim (see F18News 7 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296). Esenov said the authorities' claims that he had aroused interethnic and interreligious hatred were based on quotations from his novel which had been assumed to represent his own viewpoint, something he denied.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

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

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