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TURKMENISTAN: Six religious prisoners of conscience free, but three remain

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Six Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience have been freed this month, however, two other Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, arrested in May, and the former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, serving a twenty-two year prison sentence on charges the Turkmen authorities have refused to reveal, are known by Forum 18 News Service to be still in jail. The freed prisoners were routinely beaten during their imprisonment and pressured to renounce their faith, and in April two were threatened with death. It is believed that prisoners, including the former chief mufti, were beaten up by a special department of the Interior Ministry, in order to intimidate the prisoners before a visit by OSCE ambassadors in mid-May. Religious minorities have told Forum 18 of continuing low-level police harassment, including raids, threats and confiscations of literature.

In what appears to be a further concession to foreign pressure to end religious freedom violations, Turkmenistan's autocratic president Saparmurat Niyazov ordered six Jehovah's Witnesses to be freed early from prison. Jehovah's Witness sources have confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that the six were freed in mid-June and are now back at home with their families (see F18News 10 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=315). But they point out that two new prisoners – Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov, both arrested in May and sentenced to a year and a half in prison – have not been freed. Nor has the former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, serving a twenty-two year prison sentence on charges that have still not been clarified (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

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A Jehovah's Witness elder who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] that Masharipov and Tuvakov were arrested in their home town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in north-eastern Turkmenistan for refusing to conduct compulsory military service. It is the first time they have served sentences on these charges. "We don't know if they will be freed as well," the elder told Forum 18 on 25 June.

He said the legal status of the six freed prisoners remains unclear. "They were released – that's all. No-one said if the charges against them have been withdrawn." The freed prisoners are five conscientious objectors - Aleksandr Matveyev, Rinat Babadjanov, Shohrat Mitogorov, Ruslan Nasyrov and Rozymamed Satlykov – and another Jehovah's Witness, Kurban Zakirov, serving an eight-year sentence on charges of attacking a camp guard, charges the Jehovah's Witnesses say were fabricated. The elder said Zakirov had to be treated in hospital after his release, but is now home again with his family in the town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou).

The imprisoned conscientious objectors were routinely beaten during their imprisonment and pressured to renounce their faith, while in April two of them were threatened with death while in labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi (see F18News 19 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=323).

Former chief mufti Nasrullah was reportedly severely beaten in prison in May in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk). The Central Asian service of Deutsche Welle, quoting an anonymous source in the law enforcement agencies, reported on 24 May that that evening officials of a special department of the Interior Ministry beat up prisoners in five cells of Turkmenbashi prison, among them Nasrullah, adding that he "suffered significantly".

Deutsche Welle believed the beatings meted out to the prisoners in Turkmenbashi in May were designed to intimidate them ahead of a tour of Turkmenistan's prisons by OSCE ambassadors. The exile Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation has reported that the OMON police special forces have a separate subdivision for beating prisoners, adding that in penal colonies and prisons such "intimidation raids" are common.

An exiled politician told Forum 18 he believes Nasrullah fell out of favour with President Niyazov in 2002 after publishing a booklet on how Muslims should pray. The president was said to have been incensed that anyone apart from himself should be giving instructions to the people.

Although the 56-year-old Nasrullah was sentenced at a closed hearing by an Ashgabad court on 2 March, the Turkmen authorities have refused to give any details about the crimes they allege he committed and which articles of the criminal code he was sentenced under or to release the text of the verdict (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

Among those pressing for such information is the United States government, but the US representative to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) complained that the Turkmen government had failed to respond. "His trial, which was held without the presence of impartial observers, conflicts with Turkmenistan's OSCE commitments to due process in court proceedings," Douglas Davidson told the OSCE Permanent Council on 20 May. "To date we have not had a response to our request for information about this case, so we should like to take this opportunity to renew this request to our Turkmen colleagues." One month later, the Turkmen authorities are still refusing to make public the verdict or the charges against Nasrullah.

In mid-May, President Niyazov stripped a number of senior officials who have fallen out of favour, including Nasrullah, of their state awards.

One former senior Turkmen official, Khudaiberdy Orazov, explained that he believed it was Nasrullah's booklet on how Muslims should pray that precipitated the breakdown of relations between the then chief mufti and Niyazov. "After Nasrullah and others published some 10,000 copies of the booklet 'Instructions to Muslims', which were distributed in mosques, the president was angry," Orazov, who left Turkmenistan in April 2001 and now heads the opposition party Watan (Motherland) from exile in Western Europe, told Forum 18. "There was nothing political in the booklet, but Niyazov was angry that someone else was giving orders to the people." Orazov said the president shouted at Nasrullah at a public meeting that everything people need to know is in his own book, the *Ruhnama*.

Citing his own private sources, Orazov claimed that when Niyazov summoned officials of the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs to a meeting in late August 2002, he told them then that they should remove all copies of the booklet from mosques and should also find a replacement for Nasrullah as chief mufti. "Niyazov didn't take measures against him immediately," Orazov maintained. "He wanted people to forget and then remove him." Nasrullah was not removed as chief mufti and deputy chairman of the Gengeshi until January 2003, after the mysterious assassination attempt of November 2002 in which the authorities later claimed Nasrullah had been involved.

Orazov claimed that after Nasrullah, who is an ethnic Uzbek, fled to Uzbekistan in about May 2003, he was given assurances of his safety and returned to his home town of Dashoguz after a couple of weeks in Uzbekistan. However, he and his immediate family were put under close house arrest and he was regularly summoned to the State Security Ministry. Orazov said Niyazov finally gave the order for his arrest in December 2003 after many people had appealed for Nasrullah and praised him as a respected leader. Orazov added that Nasrullah's wife and family remain under surveillance at their home in Dashoguz.

Another exiled former Turkmen official claimed to Forum 18 in May that after Nasrullah was sentenced, devout Muslims who respected him travelled to Turkmenbashi and prayed outside the prison where they believed he was being held. "They went there as if on pilgrimage to a holy place," the former official declared.

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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