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TURKMENISTAN: Police control of believers set to continue

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In an apparent sign that they intend to keep tight control of religious communities, officers of the police sixth department, which fights organised crime and terrorism, summoned at least four religious leaders in early June. Officers demanded full information about current and planned activities, and names and addresses of all members, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Intermittent raids on religious communities continue as unregistered religious activity remains illegal. One Protestant told Forum 18 of serious threats in repeated raids on a church in Dashoguz in May. A Jehovah's Witness elder said five local officials confiscated two Bibles in a 10 June raid on a private home, adding that it is too early for them to apply for registration. "Can we apply when some of our lads are still in prison? We won't lodge an application until our community can function freely." Only four minority communities – the Adventists, the Baha'is, the Baptists and the Hare Krishnas – have gained registration since March.

Despite government claims that it has eased restrictions on religious practice and despite the early release in mid-June of six of the country's nine religious prisoners (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349), religious leaders report continuing police harassment of their communities. Although fines are not known to have been levied on believers since April, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that intermittent raids, threats and pressure to convert from minority faiths continue. Several religious leaders have told Forum 18 they have been summoned by officers of the sixth department of the police, which tracks organised crime and terrorism, and asked for full information on all their community's activities and plans. Officers are also demanding full lists of members and their addresses, as well as the names of people who live in the same buildings as their members. Unregistered religious activity remains illegal.

Of the four religious leaders known to Forum 18 to have been summoned to the sixth department in the capital Ashgabad in early June, some refused to go while others went but refused to write a statement about their activities or to present the list of members the police were demanding. One of those summoned told Forum 18 that the officers' demands indicated that the police intend to continue keeping tight control over religious activity, especially for communities that gain official registration.

The most serious harassment came in May, when secret police and police officers threatened members of a Protestant church in the town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in north-eastern Turkmenistan. "Police and secret police officers took the believers and threatened them," one Protestant, who asked not to be identified and requested that the denomination likewise not be identified, told Forum 18. "This happened several times in May." The Protestant also reported harassment of the church in other towns, including in the southern town of Tedjen. "Elsewhere the situation is fairly normal."

The Jehovah's Witnesses report that the last time any of their members were sacked from work because of their faith was in March. In April one Jehovah's Witness was fined a large sum in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou). But an elder in Ashgabad, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 on 25 June that their communities still cannot meet together in large numbers without being harassed and such harassment has continued since April.

Police visited one Jehovah's Witness' home on 8 June, while on 10 June five officials of the hyakimlik (local administration) raided the Ashgabad home of a female Jehovah's Witness. "They treated her like a criminal," the elder complained. "They also confiscated two Bibles."

The Jehovah's Witness elder says the community cannot apply for registration while such harassment continues. "Can we apply when some of our lads are still in prison? We won't lodge an application until our community can function freely," the elder told Forum 18. "What is registration anyway?"

Although the government eased registration restrictions, at least in theory, back in March the registration process is going very slowly. While Ashgabad's Baha'i and Adventist communities gained registration in early June, the first non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities to get registration since 1997 (see F18News 3 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=333), only weeks later – at the end of June – did two more of the other groups that have applied for registration receive it.

Pastor Vasily Korobov told Forum 18 on 25 June that his Baptist Church had received its registration certificate earlier that day,

though he says he has to return this week to the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry to "correct and complete" the application. Forum 18 has also heard reports that about the same time the Hare Krishna community received registration.

The Adalat Ministry has consistently refused to give Forum 18 any information about the registration process since Shirin Akhmedova was moved from her post in the department that registers religious organisations several months ago. Contacted by Forum 18 in June, Bibi Tagieva and Svetlana Maltseva, two officials from the same department, have either put down the phone or have insisted that while information on the registration process is "not a state secret" and that "we're not afraid to give information", all requests have to be channelled through the Foreign Ministry.

However, Maltseva did confirm to Forum 18 on 16 June that the Armenian Apostolic Church had not applied to register any communities, before refusing to discuss individual faiths any further. She denied suggestions that no minority religious communities will be allowed to register in towns outside Ashgabad.

Fr Ioann Kopach, Russian Orthodox dean of Ashgabad, told Forum 18 on 16 June that neither the Adalat Ministry nor the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs has yet told his Church whether it will have to re-register its 12 parishes as demanded by last October's revised religion law.

Catholic priest Fr Tomasz, one of two foreign priests based in Ashgabad who have diplomatic immunity as Vatican diplomats, told Forum 18 the Catholic Church is waiting for a letter from the Vatican and other documents before submitting its registration application. "Hopefully we will soon have registration," he told Forum 18 on 25 June. He said the Church would apply for registration to cover the whole country. "We have a few Catholics in other parts of Turkmenistan, but no organised communities. We hope to organise parishes in other towns once we have registration."

Armenia's ambassador to Turkmenistan, Aram Grigoryan, confirmed to Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 16 June that there had been no progress in regaining the historical Armenian Apostolic church in Turkmenbashi. "We're still waiting," declared the ambassador, who has long been spearheading attempts to get back the church and reopen it for worship.

Pastor Viktor Makrousov of Ashgabad's Pentecostal Church told Forum 18 he has not yet lodged his community's registration application, though he has been preparing the documents.

A member of another church, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 his community was optimistic it would soon get registration and be able to restart public worship. The church lodged its registration application some weeks ago. Asked why registration was taking so long Forum 18 was told: "A woman doesn't give birth immediately but carries her child for nine months."

It remains unclear whether Christian Churches will try again to register a Bible Society. Attempts in the late 1990s were unsuccessful. Officials of the International Religious Liberty Association outside Turkmenistan told Forum 18 it is "too early" to think of forming a branch of the association there, though they believe this is desirable as soon as it is practicable.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out if any Muslim communities plan to seek registration again for the medrassahs (Islamic colleges) closed down by the authorities in the 1990s. Sources have told Forum 18 a few private medrassahs function quietly, led by Muslims who believe current Islamic education is inadequate. A respected Turkish-run set of private schools in Turkmenistan have been banned from teaching Islam, although this is a routine part of their curriculum in Turkey and other Central Asian states.

Fr Kopach told Forum 18 that the Russian Orthodox Church does not have Sunday schools for children, though he glossed over whether this was because of state restrictions or lack of resources on the Church's part.

Pastor Korobov told Forum 18 that the Baptist Church's registration covered the whole of Turkmenistan. The Baptists have congregations in Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), Balkanabad (formerly Nebit-Dag) and Mary as well as Ashgabad. All four of its churches were closed after the communities lost registration in 1997. The Ashgabad church was confiscated, while the other three were sealed by the authorities. "It's relatively simple to reopen the three churches in other towns, but here in Ashgabad it will be more complicated," Pastor Korobov told Forum 18. "Other people are living there now." He said they would now start to work to recover the confiscated Ashgabad church.

After 1997, when all non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities lost registration, the authorities destroyed the Adventist church in Ashgabad, two Hare Krishna temples in Mary region, Ashgabad's Baha'i temple and several mosques. Moscow-based researcher Nikolai Mitrokhin told Forum 18 the authorities also destroyed a dilapidated Orthodox church in Mary in 1997 (the priest was reportedly unconcerned as the town's other church was large enough to accommodate worshippers even at Easter), while Moscow journalist Arkady Dubnov told Forum 18 an unused Russian Orthodox chapel dating back to 1913 in the southern border town of Kushka was demolished some time between 1999 and 2003 as part of government schemes to destroy old Russian monuments.

However, rebuilding or getting back former places of worship may be difficult. Veronika Annaklycheva, deputy hyakim (head of administration) of the Kopetdag district of Ashgabad where the Adventist church was bulldozed in November 1999 remained

unrepentant. "Schools and flats were destroyed to make way for reconstruction and a road," she told Forum 18 from her office in Ashgabad on 9 June. She seemed uninterested that the Adventist community had regained its registration. "I don't know anything about that – I haven't seen the certificate." She brushed off suggestions that the Adventist community should be given compensation for the destruction of their place of worship to help them rebuild it. "That's not a question for me."

Just as the Baptists' church in Ashgabad was seized, so was the city's Pentecostal church. "We want it back - it's my private property," Pastor Makrousov told Forum 18. "It would be difficult to function as a community without somewhere to meet for worship."

One Protestant pastor, who preferred not to be identified, remained highly suspicious over registration. "Honestly, it would be wrong to dance for joy at getting registration as the law and regulations are so restrictive," he told Forum 18. "Registration means being obliged to abide by all the regulations, asking for permission to hold services, invite foreigners, conduct educate or import literature. Maybe it's worse than not having registration." The pastor pointed out that conditions for registered communities are now much harsher than before harsh registration restrictions were adopted in 1996. "At least there was some freedom back then."

A representative of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects state registration on principle and has several congregations in different towns of the country, told Forum 18 that the police are still watching their activity. "They are showing they still have teeth. The law may have changed but what has changed on the ground?" The congregations regularly have to change the places they hold services to avoid police raids. The representative pointed out that until unregistered religious activity ceases to be illegal their congregations will not be free to function openly.

The representative cited a police summons to the local court to Valentina Kalataevskaya in Turkmenbashi on 25 May. Kalataevskaya, whose husband Vyacheslav was deported from Turkmenistan into neighbouring Kazakhstan in June 2001 by the secret police, was not at home when the police called. Despite threats that if she failed to go the police would arrive in force and seize her, she refused to attend on the basis of a verbal summons.

The government appears to have maintained the ban on registering specifically Shia Muslim mosques. Reportedly the only Shia place of worship that functions legally is a prayer room attached to a registered Sunni mosque in Ashgabad (which, like most schools and factories and some places of worship, has a "Ruhnama room" honouring the president's book that is forcibly imposed on the country). The Iranian embassy in Ashgabad also runs its own Shia mosque under diplomatic auspices, though this is apparently inaccessible for local citizens. Elsewhere such Shia mosques have been denied registration.

Others whose worship remains illegal include the Lutherans and several other Protestant denominations, Jews, New Apostolic believers and Molokans (an early Russian Protestant group with communities in Ashgabad and Bairam-Ali, a small town near Mary).

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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