

4 January 2005

TURKMENISTAN: 2004, the year of demolished mosques

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Hare Krishna community, Muslims in Turkmenistan have also suffered from having their places of worship demolished by the government, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In 2004 President Niyazov inaugurated "the largest mosque in Central Asia," but at least seven mosques were demolished by the authorities, Muslim and non-Muslim sources inside Turkmenistan have told Forum 18. The Baptist and Pentecostal churches in the capital Ashgabat were confiscated in 2001, leaving both communities with nowhere to worship. The Adventist church in Ashgabat and two Hare Krishna temples were bulldozed in 1999. Although both communities gained official registration in 2004, neither community has been allowed to meet publicly for worship. Also, the authorities have neither paid compensation for bulldozing their places of worship, nor allowed them to be rebuilt.

In 2004, the same year that Turkmenistan's autocratic president Saparmurat Niyazov inaugurated what officials describe as "the largest mosque in Central Asia" in his home village of Kipchak in central Turkmenistan, the authorities demolished at least seven other mosques, apparently to prevent unapproved Muslim worship from taking place. Several Muslim and non-Muslim sources inside Turkmenistan, who preferred not to be identified, have told Forum 18 News Service of seven specific mosque demolitions. The sources said they believe that other unapproved mosques might also have fallen victim to the government's desire to stifle unauthorised Muslim worship. Christians and members of other faiths are still battling to be allowed to open places of worship, or regain those confiscated or rebuild those demolished in the past six years.

The Kipchak mosque – built by the French company Bouygues and inaugurated with great pomp on 22 October 2004 – angered some Muslims by incorporating on its walls not only quotations from the Koran, but from the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), a pseudo-spiritual work claimed to have been written by President Niyazov. Muslims regard the use of such quotations – and the requirement that copies of the Ruhnama be placed in mosques on a par with the Koran as well as instructions to imams to quote lavishly from the president's work in sermons – as blasphemous. Few Muslims reportedly attend the Kipchak mosque for regular prayers, though it can house up to 10,000 worshippers. Apparently as part of a policy of isolating Turkmen religious believers of all faiths, no foreign Muslim religious dignitaries were permitted to attend the inauguration (see F18News 26 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=439).

Islam is traditionally the faith of the majority in Turkmenistan, and it is also the faith under the tightest government control. The president installed the new chief mufti Rovshen Allaberdiyev last August after removing his predecessor, while the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs names all imams throughout the country (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349). Only about 140 mosques – all of them under the state-controlled muftiate – now have state registration, just a fraction of the number of a decade ago when religious practice was freer.

Independent mosques have been demolished in recent years – such as those built by Imam Ahmed Orazgylych in a suburb of Ashgabat [Ashgabat] and in the village of Govki-Zeren near Tedjen [Tejen] in southern Turkmenistan, both bulldozed in 2000 – while others that reject the forced imposition of the Ruhnama have been shut down – such as the mosque closed on National Security Ministry orders in late 2003 after mosque leaders refused to place the Ruhnama in a place of honour (see F18News 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187).

Other faiths too face severe difficulties maintaining places of worship. The authorities have refused to allow the two Hare Krishna temples bulldozed in Mary region in summer 1999 and the Seventh-day Adventist church bulldozed in Ashgabat in November 1999 to be rebuilt and have refused to pay any compensation. Neither community has been allowed to meet publicly for worship despite both having regained official registration in 2004 (see F18News 4 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=424).

Nor have the Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Ashgabat – closed down and confiscated in 2001 – been handed back, leaving both communities with nowhere to worship. The government has also refused to hand back an Armenian Apostolic church in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashy] confiscated during the Soviet period, despite repeated appeals by the local Armenian community. Other religious communities which have been denied registration – including other Protestant churches, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church – likewise have nowhere to meet.

The 2004 mosque demolitions appear to have occurred in two waves, with three demolished in the first wave at the beginning of 2004, and a further four in a second wave in Ashgabad since October. Two of the demolitions were on the eve of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

"The mosques demolished in the spring had been built without permission," one source told Forum 18. "The demolitions were not reported in the media, but they didn't take place covertly either."

The three mosques known to have been demolished in the first wave were a Shia mosque used by local ethnic Iranians in the village of Bagyr near Ashgabad, as well as small Sunni mosques in the town of Serdar (formerly Kyzyl-Arvat) in western Turkmenistan and in the village of Geoktepe, 45 kilometres (30 miles) north-west of Ashgabad. "The Geoktepe mosque was in the middle of the old fortress," one source told Forum 18. "The authorities wanted all the Muslims to go to the main, newly-built mosque." The massive Saparmurat Haji mosque, named after the president and completed in the 1990s, was, like the Kipchek mosque, built by the Bouygues company. The construction cost was a reported 86 million US dollars.

The autumn wave of demolitions began with the demolition of two mosques in Ashgabad - one on Bitarap Turkmenistan (former Podvoisky) Street and the second in the southern part of the city near the Customs Clearing House on the road to the Turkmen-Iranian Howdan-Bajgyran border checkpoint. Both were demolished on 15 October, just one day before the start of Ramadan.

"Worshippers in both mosques were told that these mosques were being demolished because the local government is planning to build a new road and to widen the existing one," a source told Forum 18 from Ashgabad. "Of course, nothing has yet been built there."

A visitor to the Bitarap Turkmenistan Street mosque in August found it looking "pretty good", with people repairing and painting the inside of the relatively large building. Sources told Forum 18 that local people were "really unhappy" when the local authorities informed them the mosque was to be demolished.

"According to some unconfirmed rumours, construction of these mosques was financed by some unidentified Arab charities," one source added. "This might have been one of the reasons for their demolition." Some local imams referred to the mosque on Bitarap Turkmenistan Street as a Wahhabi mosque, a reference to the brand of Sunni Islam that predominates in Saudi Arabia, though the term "Wahhabi" is used more widely (and often wrongly) in Central Asia as a synonym for "Muslim extremist".

Soon afterwards a privately-built mosque, located on Garashsyzyk Avenue in the Garadamak area of southern Ashgabad, was demolished, together with a large number of houses in the same area. "However, I doubt that this was the main reason to get rid of it," a source told Forum 18 from Ashgabad. The source, who visited the mosque in July, said that the imam, who used to live in a nearby house, seemed at that time to be unaware of the government's imminent plans to demolish his mosque.

The most recent demolition, in November, was of another private mosque located in the Choganly area of northern Ashgabad, near the city's largest market called Tolkushka. It too was not registered with the government but, unlike the Garashsyzyk Avenue mosque, could not operate due to strong opposition from the local authorities. No other houses around this mosque in Choganly are known to have been demolished, only the mosque itself. Although mass rebuilding has taken place in other parts of Ashgabad in recent years, the government does not appear to have plans to build anything in Choganly.

One local Muslim suggested that all four of the Ashgabad mosques demolished in the autumn were targeted because their imams refused to read Niyazov's Ruhnama in their mosques.

Other Muslims trace the start of the latest wave of demolitions of private mosques to a presidential speech complaining of alleged attempts to sow discord in the country. "Some people are coming here and taking our lads to teach them," Niyazov told a meeting in the city of Turkmenbashi on 22 September 2004. "Eight lads have been taken in this way to make them into Wahhabis. This means they will come back later and start disputes among us. Therefore let us train them here, in Ashgabad, at a faculty of theology."

Sources have told Forum 18 that Khezretkuli Khanov, head of the Gengeshi for the capital Ashgabad, has complained to visitors to his office in recent months that he constantly faces the problem of dealing with mosques functioning without the required permission. Unregistered religious activity is illegal in Turkmenistan, in defiance of international human rights norms. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan 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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY