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TURKMENISTAN: Police beat Baptist with Bible and threaten to hang her

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Police raiding a private home in Turkmenabad, where Baptists gather regularly for Bible study and prayer, beat the host, Asiya Zasedatelevaya, with her own Bible and even threatened to hang her, local Baptists told Forum 18 News Service. She has now appealed for the return of Christian literature they confiscated from her. Zasedatelevaya stated that "they started to interrogate me, despite the fact that I'm a third-category invalid unable to hear and speak," and that when she did not reveal where she had got her Christian books, one of the policemen hit her over the head with her Bible, while the second hit her in the face. "The local policeman threatened to hang me," she added. "During all this my four-year-old child was present in the flat." Forum 18 has been unable to reach the police to question them about the raid. There have been reports that, since President Niyazov issued a call for the country to adopt one set of religious rites, pressure on religious minorities has increased.

Police raiding a private home in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew), where Baptists gather regularly for Bible study and prayer, beat the host, Asiya Zasedatelevaya, with her own Bible and one even threatened to hang her, local Baptists told Forum 18 News Service on 23 July. She has now appealed for all the Christian literature they confiscated from her – "for which we have a great need" - to be returned. Forum 18 was unable to reach the city police chief to ask him why this raid, confiscation and threats were made.

Zasedatelevaya reported that three men burst into her flat at 9 pm on 19 July, two of them in civilian clothes, accompanied by the local police captain in uniform. "Without identifying themselves or showing authorisation for a search they pushed me away from the door and began a search," she stated. She said that the police took away all her religious literature, as well as a Russian dictionary, without giving her a record of the confiscation. "Then they started to interrogate me, despite the fact that I'm a third-category invalid unable to hear and speak." She said that when she failed to reveal where she had got her Christian books, one of the plainclothes men hit her over the head with her Bible, while the second hit her in the face. "The local policeman threatened to hang me," she added. "During all this my four-year-old child was present in the flat."

She was then taken to the police station, where another local policeman, Durliev (first name unknown), claimed to her that neighbours had written a statement reporting that meetings lasting two to three hours were held in her flat before participants dispersed. It remains unclear why this should have concerned the police.

Zasedatelevaya declared that she regularly hosts meetings of between ten and fifteen local Baptists in her flat each week "to study the Word of God". As well as calling for the confiscated literature to be returned, she also demanded an end to official harassment simply for meeting privately to study the Bible. Her Baptist congregation belongs to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries

Members of another Baptist congregation in Turkmenabad, who belong to the nationally-registered Baptist Union, were fined in March and two families were evicted from their hostels in punishment for meeting for worship, despite being part of a registered church. The police described the worship as "illegal" and stated that it would be better for the Baptists to follow Islam (see F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535).

The activity of registered communities remains restricted, with officials insisting that no religious meetings can be held in private homes. Registered congregations are pressured to subscribe to the blasphemous cult of personality around the country's president, Saparmurat Niyazov (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Since President Saparmurat Niyazov issued his 1 July call for the country to adopt one set of religious rites, stating that "we have one religion and unique traditions and customs, and there is no need for people to look beyond these" (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614), Deutsche Welle has reported increased pressure on religious minorities. The radio station stated that local authorities had warned Hare Krishna devotees in the Mary region not to meet for religious rites in private homes. Officials forced them to sign statements that they would only hold meetings in places specially provided for religious purposes, such as premises rented from state institutions, houses of culture, clubs and cafes. However, local sources told Deutsche

Welle that directors of organisations and houses of culture either refuse to rent out their premises or demand such high fees that they are unaffordable.

One director of a government-owned house of culture in the capital Ashgabad told Deutsche Welle that the city authorities had warned him and fellow directors in the city that providing premises for religious minorities is "unacceptable". An official of the Interior Ministry told the radio station that the move was prompted by Niyazov's recent pronouncement on religious issues, which was shown on television.

One Hare Krishna devotee told Deutsche Welle that law-enforcement officers began visiting devotees' homes immediately after the speech. "They took signatures on statements that we would not violate Niyazov's instruction on the ban on holding meetings in homes. And although we are registered with the Justice Ministry, we are banned from meeting even in the place we are registered."

The Hare Krishna devotee noted that Protestants in Mary, Iolotan, Murgab and Turkmenabad had reported similar developments. "All our believers are on file at the State Security Ministry secret police and we are treated as though we have a criminal record," the devotee told Deutsche Welle. "They will not register any business activity in our names, we are banned from explaining our ideas to our fellow citizens, and believers are practically banned from meeting together. It is terrible, but despite this, people don't lose hope and wait for help from God."

Hare Krishna devotees are an officially registered religious community, and other registered communities, such as Baptists, Seventh day Adventists, and Pentecostals, also face strong official pressure and restrictions (see F18News 10 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=582), as do the unregistered - and de facto illegal - communities.

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>

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