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TURKMENISTAN: Are Baptists terrorists or organised criminals?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Plain-clothes police, from the "department for the struggle with terrorism and organised crime," broke up last Sunday morning's worship of the registered Baptist church in the eastern town of Mary, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. All those present were subjected to filmed separate interrogations, starting with the women and children. Forum 18 was told that the police made statements in the interrogations such as "we know you're a non-believer and just come for the money, you get money from Americans, write that you won't come here again, your meetings are unauthorised, you are law-breakers, registration doesn't cover you." Local Baptists insist to Forum 18 that their state registration certificate is for the "Church of Evangelical Christians and Baptists of Turkmenistan" and therefore covers congregations across the country. This is the latest attack in ongoing official attacks on both registered and unregistered religious communities.

About ten police officers in civilian clothes broke up the Sunday morning service last Sunday (31 July) of the local congregation of the registered Baptist Church in the town of Mary in eastern Turkmenistan, Protestant sources who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service. One of the intruders identified himself to church members as Eziz Agaev of Mary town police department 6, which handles the struggle with terrorism and organised crime. "The service was broken up, then they started filming everyone present and the building with a video-camera," one Protestant told Forum 18. "Then they asked everyone to take all their books with them and follow them on foot to the police department for the struggle with terrorism and organised crime." There police started interrogations with the children and women, before moving on to the men.

This is the latest attack on members of the officially-registered Baptist church, whose congregations and members have continued to be attacked even after gaining state registration (see eg. F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535), along with pressure directed against other registered communities (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

This is not the first time that police officers supposedly concerned with terrorism and organised crime have instead attacked religious minorities (see eg. F18News 9 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=208 and 31 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=501).

All those who had been present at Sunday's Baptist service - including children - were interrogated in separate rooms, one by one, and their answers were filmed, in a clear attempt to bully worshippers. "The questions were the same: about place of birth, place of work, residence, religious affiliation, how you ended up here [at church], why you come here, why you don't speak Turkmen, who pays you, how much they pay, we know you're a non-believer and just come for the money, you get money from Americans, write that you won't come here again, your meetings are unauthorised, you are law-breakers, registration doesn't cover you."

Church members were not freed until 1 pm in the afternoon, nearly three hours after the service had been broken up. "They demanded that each one promise not to come to services in future," Protestants reported. "They wanted to invite the teachers of the children present with their parents, but because teachers are now off on holiday they were not able to summon them to the police."

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that local Baptists insist that their registration certificate issued by the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry on 25 June 2004 is for the "Church of Evangelical Christians and Baptists of Turkmenistan" and therefore does cover congregations across the country. «Notice it doesn't say "Ashgabad," but "Turkmenistan," one local Protestant pointed out to Forum 18.

Continued strong official pressure has been used against registered communities of Baptists, as well as other officially registered religious communities, such as Seventh day Adventists, Pentecostals and Hare Krishna devotees (see eg. F18News 10 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=582). Strong official pressure also continues to be used against unregistered - and de facto illegal - communities, such as those from the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries (see F18News 29 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=621).

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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