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TURKMENISTAN: Police claim "individuals can only believe alone"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Anti-terrorist police raided last Sunday's (14 August) worship service of a registered Baptist church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After the service, Forum 18 was told, police questioned church members, confiscating all Turkmen-language Bibles and Hymnbooks. The police took particular interest in children at the service, and were disappointed they were in the service with parental permission. Next day, church leaders were summoned for "more thorough interrogation," and told that the Baptist Church's national state registration is "not valid for northern Turkmenistan." This claim has been made elsewhere in the country, and Baptists strongly dispute it. Police pressured church leaders to sign a declaration that the church will not meet until it had state registration. "We met for worship before 'your registration' existed, and will continue to meet now we have registration, even if you did not recognise it. And we will continue to meet in future as our faith does not depend on registration," church leaders told police.

Anti-Terrorist Branch police in the north-eastern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] summoned the leaders of the city's registered Baptist Church on 15 August in the wake of a raid on the church's Sunday worship service the previous day, Protestant sources who preferred not to be named have told Forum 18 News Service. The leaders were summoned again to the 6th Department for Combating Terrorism and Organised Crime on 16 August for a "more thorough interrogation."

They were warned that the Baptist Church's national registration with the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] is "not valid for northern Turkmenistan," a claim that Baptists strongly dispute (see F18News 2 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=623).

Given that unregistered religious activity is illegal in Turkmenistan, the claim of the 6th Department (which has responsibility for terrorism and other organised crime) implies that any organised activity by the congregation would be considered to be illegal. The same claim has been repeated to communities, of a variety of faiths, by other police departments outside the capital. Barring unregistered religious activity breaches Turkmenistan's international human rights commitments.

Officers warned church leaders that they had no right to hold church services or to read the Bible together in the countryside, and that such activity was an offence. They said that without registration of the congregation in Dashoguz, the congregation cannot meet or spread their faith.

"Individuals can only believe alone on their own at home," police warned. Forum 18 was told that police questioning the church leaders were unable to find Article 11 of Turkmenistan's constitution, which reads in part: "Everyone shall have the right independently to define his attitude toward religion, to profess any religion or not profess any either individually or jointly with others, to profess and disseminate beliefs associated with his attitude to religion, and to participate in the practice of religious cults, rituals, and rites." (For the full text see the Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296).

Police pressured the church leaders to write statements on how they had become Christians, why they had copies of the Bible and why they read it. They were also pressured to sign a declaration that the church would not meet until it had obtained state registration. "We met for worship before 'your registration' existed, and will continue to meet now we have registration, even if you did not recognise it," church leaders told the police. "And we will continue to meet in future as our faith does not depend on registration."

Trouble began for the Turkmen-language Baptist congregation after an open-air Sunday service on 14 August near the town. "The church travelled out into the countryside with the aim of holding a service outside the walls of a private flat, to praise God and read the Injil, the Word of God," one Baptist told Forum 18. "It was a purely Turkmen service in the Turkmen language." After the service, church members intended to share a meal of Plov, a local rice dish, but no sooner was the food ready than "uninvited guests appeared from nowhere." Some ten police officers, some in uniform and some in plain clothes, questioned the church members about what they were doing. They confiscated all the Turkmen-language Bibles and Hymnbooks church members had with them, sources told Forum 18.

The officers were particularly interested in the children present, asking why they were there and whether permission from their parents had been obtained. "To their great disappointment," one source told Forum 18, "their parents were present with the children as they too are believers." Officers drew up an official report listing those present and recording the confiscated books.

Asked by church members to identify themselves, only three of the ten police officers did so: Bahram Hasanov, head of the detective Criminal Investigation Department for Niyazov region (which includes Dashoguz), Orazgeldy Kurbanbaev of the 6th Department for Combating Terrorism and Organised Crime, and local police Inspector Hairula Rahimov.

Registered Baptists in the eastern towns of Turkmenabad (see eg. F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535 and Mary have also had their services attacked by police – in the latter case anti-terrorist police - and similar claims were made in both cases that the congregations are in fact unregistered (see F18News 2 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=623).

The much-trumpeted 2004 "liberalisation" of state religious policy, in particular announced changes in registration policy, was greeted by some outside observers with optimism. But many religious believers within Turkmenistan viewed the announcements with great scepticism (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390)

Experience since the "liberalisation" tends to confirm the view of the sceptics. 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). Registered congregations are pressured to give honour to the extreme cult of personality surrounding the country's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or Father of the Turkmens (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

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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