

5 December 2005

TURKMENISTAN: Hare Krishna prisoner of conscience to be moved

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The second known religious prisoner of conscience in Turkmenistan, Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova, is to be moved to the country's only women's prison, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "This is a long way from her home in Ashgabad and will make it difficult for people to visit her," Forum 18 was told. "Besides, it is in a closed border zone and anyone wanting to visit will need a special permit." Annaniyazova was sentenced in November to seven years in jail on three charges, one of which was not made public. The extra sentence imposed in the wake of the accusation was likewise not made public. The judge in Annaniyazova's case refused to give her lawyer a copy of the written verdict, or even to let the lawyer see it, which one source told Forum 18 may have been a deliberate attempt to prevent a legal appeal. It is thought within Turkmenistan that the seven year jail sentence was imposed to intimidate the Hare Krishna community.

Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova, sentenced on 17 November in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] to seven years' imprisonment, was told she would be transferred in late November to Turkmenistan's only women's prison in the northern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] close to the border with Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "This is a long way from her home in Ashgabad and will make it difficult for people to visit her," one source told Forum 18. "Besides, it is in a closed border zone and anyone wanting to visit will need a special permit."

Annaniyazova, one of the first people in Turkmenistan to become a Hare Krishna devotee, was accused under three charges, two of which related to illegally crossing the border three years ago when she went to Kazakhstan to live at the Hare Krishna temple in Almaty. The third accusation was, sources told Forum 18, not made public at the trial and the extra sentence imposed in the wake of the accusation was likewise not made public, though the sentence she received exceeds the maximum penalty possible under the known accusations. It is thought within Turkmenistan that the heavy sentence was imposed at the behest of the MSS (Ministry of State Security) secret police, in order to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690).

Turkmen sources point out to Forum 18 that the prosecution claimed Annaniyazova had secretly crossed the border, refusing to acknowledge that on her return journey she had openly flown under her own name from Almaty in Kazakhstan direct to the Turkmen capital Ashgabad. The court would not recognise her documentary evidence of her flight ticket, nor a certificate of a fine levied on departure from Kazakhstan by the police, for overstaying her time in the country without documentation.

Despite a claimed abolition of exit visas, Turkmenistan denies religious believers permission to leave the country and is currently barring two Protestants and another Hare Krishna devotee (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=685).

Sources say the judge at Ashgabad city court has refused to give her lawyer a copy of the written verdict, or even to let the lawyer see it. This has made it impossible for Annaniyazova to appeal against the verdict, as any appeal has to be lodged within ten days of the verdict being presented in court. This period ran out on 27 November. One source told Forum 18 that the refusal to supply the written verdict may have been a deliberate move to prevent any appeal. However, refusal to issue written verdicts is widespread in Turkmenistan.

The exile Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights told Forum 18 that only relatives are allowed to visit prisoners and they must apply for permission through the Interior Ministry. It added that almost the entire northern parts of Turkmenistan are closed border zones, meaning that local people can only invite their relatives and must receive permission from the local administration and police, before the police where the relative lives can issue a permit to visit. The reason for the visit has to be reported.

The address of the labour camp where Annaniyazova is due to be held is: Turkmenistan, Dashoguz, ulica Ilyalinskaya, Zhenskaya Koloniya DZ-K/8.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that in September 2005 there were some 1,950 women crammed into the prison,

though this was before the Ramadan prisoner amnesty. In the run-up to the amnesty, the camp was so overcrowded some of the women had to sleep outside or on the floor between bunks. If they paid a bribe they were allowed to sleep in the mortuary. The group said a large camp has grown up outside the prison gates with relatives waiting to be admitted for visits, adding that the one hour that prisoners are supposed to be allowed monthly is often reduced to just twenty minutes.

Annaniyazova is the second currently known religious prisoner of conscience in Turkmenistan. Former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah is serving a 22 year sentence on charges the government has also refused to make public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

Violence and psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs are said to have been used against previous religious prisoners of conscience (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438 and 17 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

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