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TURKMENISTAN: Secret police ban church renting hall?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

After four weeks of holding services in a rented hall in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], the registered Greater Grace Protestant church has been banned from holding meetings in state-owned premises, it is thought on the initiative of the MSS secret police. "This was the first time we could meet together as a church for many years," church members told Forum 18 News Service. "Now we've had to try to find a private venue." Many difficulties now face the church in overcoming this problem. At a state-sponsored meeting for religious communities, officials – included the Deputy Foreign Minister, the Deputy Justice Minister and the deputy head of the state Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs – made it clear that registered religious communities cannot either rent publicly-owned premises or meet in private homes. Some religious communities are able to meet, but Forum 18 has been told that, outside the capital, "local authorities in other towns just do what they like."

After four weeks of holding services in a rented hall in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], the registered Greater Grace Protestant church was banned in late November from holding meetings in publicly-owned premises. It is thought within Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service has been told, that this was a decision of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. "This was the first time we could meet together as a church for many years," church members told Forum 18 in early December. "Now we've had to try to find a private venue." Only two of the registered Protestant churches are currently able to meet as a community for public worship in rented facilities in Ashgabat, the Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ. The other registered Protestant churches remain unable to meet as a church body.

As unregistered religious activity remains illegal – in defiance of Turkmenistan's international human rights commitments – religious communities that do not have registration face even more difficulties than registered communities. "Our communities can't meet as a church body in any of the towns where we have congregations," a member of one unregistered Protestant church told Forum 18 in early December. "Our people can only meet quietly in small groups – there is still a lot of fear around." The Protestant said that, when the church enquired about possible registration, the church was told that any congregation had to buy a house for services before a registration application would even be considered. Unregistered communities are denied a legal personality and so cannot buy property.

Obstruction to finding places they were allowed to use for worship was one of the major complaints from registered religious communities at a government-sponsored roundtable meeting, in Ashgabat in late October. "All the pastors set out their need for this to be resolved – they're in a vicious circle," one Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. Officials – who included the Deputy Foreign Minister, the Deputy Justice Minister and Murad Karriyev, deputy head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs – made it clear that registered religious communities cannot either rent publicly-owned premises or meet in private homes.

The officials said that registered religious communities can buy buildings to use as places of worship, provided they are free-standing, are not near schools and kindergartens, and are not in residential or commercial districts. "In effect this means they have to be in remote parts of towns where people will find it hard to reach them and there may not even be electricity and water supplies," one Protestant commented. "Moreover, churches can't put up signs declaring that they are churches."

At the meeting, officials also defended the confiscation several years ago of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Ashgabat, insisting that such confiscations were lawful at the time. These churches have made no progress in regaining their buildings or receiving compensation.

The Greater Grace church signed a rental contract with a geological institution in Ashgabat to hold services there on Sundays. "It was a good hall," church members report. "We invited officials from the city's Religious Affairs Office and they came to the services – it was all done officially and openly." Then, after the fourth service, an employee of the institution phoned to say there were problems over continuing the contract. The church then spoke to Karriyev of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, who said that the church could rent such facilities.

However, an official of the city administration's Religious Affairs Office then told the church that it could not continue meeting in the state-owned hall. "We asked for that in writing but the official refused to put anything in writing," church members told Forum

18. "But he insisted we couldn't meet there." The church believes the decision originated with the MSS secret police.

The church is planning to write to the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry to seek clarification of where it can meet. "Other people who want to rent state facilities can do so, but not religious communities it seems," church members complained. "I don't know why – there's no law which forbids this."

The Greater Grace church gained official registration from the Adalat Ministry at the end of August after a year's foot-dragging. "We lodged the application in June 2004 but for nine months there was absolute silence," church members told Forum 18. "Then the minister changed and in the end we finally got registration."

Meanwhile, the Adventists – whose church in Ashgabad was bulldozed by the authorities in 1999 - have been renting a cafe to hold services for the last nine months and report that there have been "no unpleasant incidents" in Ashgabad. "No-one bothers us and no-one prevents us conducting our services as we wish," one church member told Forum 18 from Ashgabad in early December. "We invite government representatives to important events and festivals." However, the congregation laments how expensive the rental is and notes that this is forcing it to find a new venue.

The Adventists also note that their congregation in the north-eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) is once again able to meet publicly for worship in a rented house, after a raid on their service in late October and the detention of congregation members for six hours. "Everything worked out well," one Adventist told Forum 18, pointing out that the "intervention and active help" of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs had secured the cancellation of the large fines imposed on participants, the return of personal Bibles and other seized literature and even apologies for the way church members had been treated. "I believe this is a good sign of the change in the situation to the better," the Adventist maintained.

Other religious minority communities – whether registered or not – complain that conditions are even more difficult away from Ashgabad than in the capital. "Local authorities in other towns just do what they like," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They're not afraid that they'll be reported to the central government. Local believers too are more afraid and don't know their rights." The Protestant said incidents of harassment and verbal abuse against religious minorities occur frequently.

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>

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