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TURKMENISTAN: Official "religious hatred" towards non-Muslim faiths

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan have complained to Forum 18 News Service about continuing official "religious hatred" towards followers of non-Islamic faiths. "Christians are disturbed that officials try to pressure people to turn away from the faith they have chosen," one Ashgabad-based Protestant told Forum 18. "Such officials are inciting interreligious hatred and this should end." The most recent such incident known to Forum 18 is official pressure by a 12-strong commission of officials and the local Muslim imam to force a convert to Christianity to renounce their faith. Officers of the Police and the Interior Ministry 6th Department – responsible for anti-terrorism and the fight against organised crime and religious activity – took part in the attacks. Members of minority faiths remain concerned that, while official policy proclaims interethnic and interreligious harmony, the reality is different, with hostility, threats and pressure to convert "back" to Islam.

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] and elsewhere in the country have complained to Forum 18 News Service about what they regard as officials' continuing "religious hatred" towards followers of non-Islamic faiths. "Christians are disturbed that officials try to pressure people to turn away from the faith they have chosen," one Ashgabad-based Protestant told Forum 18. "Such officials are inciting interreligious hatred and this should end." Jehovah's Witnesses voiced similar concerns to Forum 18.

The most recent such incident known to Forum 18 is official pressure in December 2005 on a recent convert to Christianity, by a 12-strong commission of officials and the local Muslim imam. The ethnic Turkmen convert to Christianity, who is not identified for fear of retribution, joined a Protestant congregation in Ashgabad in late 2005. The convert soon faced beatings from relatives and expulsion from the family home. The family then brought in officers of the Police and the Interior Ministry 6th Department to hunt the convert down. The 6th Department is responsible for anti-terrorism and the fight against organised crime and religious activity.

Once the convert was located, the police took the convert to two police stations for interrogation and then to the local Hyakimlik (administration). "For an hour, 12 officials of the commission that handles violations of the law shouted at the convert that they were a traitor to their faith," one Christian told Forum 18. "In the presence of some relatives, they told the convert that if they renounced Christianity and returned to Islam nothing more would happen. But the convert refused to renounce the Christian faith." The convert was then allowed to go, although officials told the convert on leaving: "You're ill" and "Your head isn't working". Christians told Forum 18 that after the intimidation at the hyakimlik, the convert has been left alone.

Forum 18 tried to find out why members of religious minorities face insults to their faith and pressure to convert to another faith, especially in the light of the country's proclaimed official separation of religion from the state. However, telephones went unanswered on 19 January at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs and at the presidential Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (which always defends the government's actions). Likewise unavailable was Ashgabad's official imam Mekan Akyev, who holds a post at the city hyakimlik (administration) alongside his duties as a Muslim cleric.

Members of religious minorities remain concerned that while official policy proclaims interethnic and interreligious harmony, the reality is different, with hostility, threats and pressure to convert "back" to Islam. "This double attitude comes from the very top," Protestants complained. "On the one hand the President proclaims that registration of religious communities is possible and that constitutional guarantees of religious freedom will be honoured, while on the other he talks on television of people 'betraying' their faith."

In the wake of a 17 December 2005 raid on a prayer meeting of the Turkmen-speaking registered Baptist church in the town of Deynau, in the north-eastern Lebap region, officials insulted the faith of those detained and even told the Baptists that local authorities should hold public meetings in villages, where Christians should be personally named and denounced as traitors (see F18News 19 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=707).

"You're Turkmen – you should be Muslims," those detained were told. Officials threatened to summon the entire local population and put the group of Protestants in the middle of them. "The idea was to shame and humiliate them so as to frighten others off who

might be tempted to become Christians," Protestant sources told Forum 18. "Although a date was named, officials eventually let them go, but only after they had forced the believers to sign a statement that they would read the president's book, the Ruhnama, instead of the New Testament." President Niyazov's "spiritual writings" are a compulsory part of life in Turkmenistan (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

In recent years, officials have frequently insulted and expressed hostility to the faith of members of religious minorities, especially Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. These expressions of religious hatred are often accompanied by threats, beatings and fines. "About five years ago such harassment and pressure was often sparked after church members signed religious registration applications," one Protestant told Forum 18. "Such registration was never given then, but officials used the lists of names to harass ethnic Turkmens or ethnic Uzbeks who signed the applications."

Such pressure was especially common in villages, the Protestant added. Officials together with the local mullah often descended on the homes of church members and publicly berated them as "traitors", warning neighbours not to associate with them. "Cases still come up today where police berate local Protestants, but prefer to do so in private," the Protestant reported. "They do not want any witnesses to what they are doing."

Religious minorities complain that the official positions given to Muslim clerics in the government's religious affairs administration and the closeness of many local mullahs to the authorities – especially in villages – helps promote intolerance of religious minorities.

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