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TURKMENISTAN: Heavy fines on Turkmenabad Baptists

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In the wake of a raid on a Baptist church in Turkmenabad, apartment owner Yeldash Roziev has been fined nearly 100 dollars for allowing his home to be used for a religious meeting, local Baptists reported in a statement reaching Forum 18 News Service. Officials also threatened to confiscate his apartment. All the others attending the 13 June prayer meeting, who are signing deaf and speech impaired, were each fined nearly 50 dollars by the city administration on 19 June. Officials declined to explain to Forum 18 why the Baptists had been fined for meeting for worship in a private home. "Why do you keep on telephoning us!?" assistant procurator Mukhamad Tashliev told Forum 18. "We never have and never will give any information over the telephone!"

The owner of an apartment used by a Baptist church in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou), Yeldash Roziev, has been given a heavy fine for allowing his home to be used for worship. The church, which mainly serves signing deaf and speech impaired Baptists, was raided by the authorities during a prayer meeting on 13 June (see F18News 18 June 2003). All those who attended were fined on 19 June, reports a statement from local Baptists reaching Forum 18 News Service. Officials declined to explain to Forum 18 why the Baptists had been fined for meeting for worship in a private home.

The Baptists were summoned to attend an administrative commission at the city administration, where Roziev was fined 500,000 manats (668 Norwegian kroner, 82 Euros or 94 US dollars) for allowing his home to be used for a religious meeting. The commission also threatened to take away his apartment. All the other Baptists were fined 250,000 manats each. The commission ordered the Baptists to sign the decree certifying the fine, but they refused to do so. "The documents were then thrust into their hands and they were threatened that if they did not sign them they would be imprisoned for 15 days," church members reported in the 19 June statement. Aleksandr Frolov was again threatened with being expelled from the country.

All those fined are signing deaf and speech impaired (apart from Roziev), and each receives a monthly invalidity benefit of 300,000 manats. "The administrative commission also threatened that police officers would visit them in their homes every day to check what they were doing."

Forum 18's attempts to establish whether the authorities regarded this as normal practice in Turkmenistan were in vain. Reached on 24 June, the assistant head of Turkmenabad city administration, Davlet Yekuly declared that "he knew nothing about what had happened to the Baptists". He also refused to give Forum 18 the telephone numbers of members of the administrative commission. Forum 18's attempt to find out from the city procuracy why the Baptists had been fined was also fruitless. "Why do you keep on telephoning us!?" assistant procurator Mukhamad Tashliev told Forum 18 on 24 June. "We never have and never will give any information over the telephone!"

The Turkmenabad Baptist church was the tenth religious community known to have been raided by the authorities since the latest crackdown on religious minorities began in early May. On 13 June, 11 officials, including two in army uniform, raided a prayer meeting being held in Roziev's apartment. During the subsequent interrogation, Roziev and Frolov were threatened with a twelve-year prison term. Officers also tried to recruit Roziev as a spy within the church.

Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics. No faiths except for the officially-allowed Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been allowed to register any communities. The government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal. Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and other Protestants, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutherans, the Jews, Hare Krishna communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and others are thus denied the opportunity of worshipping legally.

Since May, pressure on religious minorities has intensified with a series of apparently coordinated raids in six different locations on various communities, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, as well as Hare Krishna communities (see F18News 10 June 2003). In all these cases, the police burst into private apartments where representatives of religious minorities had gathered, and took them to the police station.

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