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TURKMENISTAN: "It seems the bad times are coming back"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Sources within Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 News Service that they think that "the bad times are coming back." The latest indication of a growing crackdown on Turkmenistan's Protestants is the threats and public humiliation faced by a group of ethnic Turkmen Christians. Houses were searched by the MSS secret police, the hakim (head) of the district administration, the head of the collective farm and the local mullah. Two compulsory public meetings were then held, attended by hakimlik officials, the collective farm chairman, the MSS secret police, the ordinary police and the local mullah. At both meetings, Protestant parents were named and threats were made that electricity, gas and water supplies to their homes would be cut off, that their children would be expelled from school, and that they would not be given farm land to cultivate. Christians were accused of "conducting criminal activity and political activity against the government" and the meetings were told that the authorities "would do whatever it takes to crush and destroy them." The raid and threats coincided with a visit to the country by Ambassador Christian Strohal, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

In what appears to be a growing crackdown on Protestants in Turkmenistan, members of a Protestant church in a village near the north-eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) had their houses raided and searched by local officials and secret police on 20 May, Protestant sources who did not wish to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. On the following two days, public meetings were held where church members were publicly humiliated and threatened.

The Protestants are members of an independent Turkmen-language church in the village of Dogryyol (Bright Path) in Serdarabad district, 25 kms (15 miles) from Turkmenabad.

Embarrassingly for the government, the raids and threats in Dogryyol coincided with the visit to Turkmenistan of Christian Strohal, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). During the visit Ambassador Strohal met President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, when he raised human rights concerns.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the office of the Foreign Minister, Rashid Meredov, or the International Organisations Department of the Foreign Ministry to find out how the latest attacks on freedom of thought, conscience and belief fit with the pledges to work with the ODIHR on human rights President Berdymukhamedov made to Ambassador Strohal. Telephones went unanswered on 25 May.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the hakim, Hezret Muradov, or other officials at the hakimlik (administration) of Serdarabad district on 25 May.

The head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, Charygeldy Seryaev, said he had heard nothing about the raids and threats to the Protestants in Dogryyol. He denied that anyone in Turkmenistan had their religious rights restricted. "Whoever wants to can pray," he insisted to Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 25 May.

However, he declined to discuss any recent cases of persecution, including the jailing of Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky for three years in a labour camp. The trial coincided with a visit to Turkmenistan of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour (see F18News 14 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=955). Seryaev also refused to or the arrest of another Baptist, Yevgeny Potolov, and the separate seizing of furniture from his home as his wife Valentina refuses to pay a fine for holding a worship service (see F18News 22 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=960).

Likewise, Seryaev of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs professed ignorance of the continued imprisonment of former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=914). "I don't know where he is," he maintained. "How can I know? I have only been in this job since July 2006." He kept referring Forum 18 to the Gengeshi's deputy chair, Murad Karriyev, though he denied that he was afraid to discuss such cases.

The official who then answered Karriyev's telephone said he was not present, even though Seryaev had told Forum 18 he was there.

The raids in Dogryyol began on the evening of 20 May, when three or four men dressed in official uniforms raided the home of a

church leader. "They searched the whole house obviously looking for something," Protestants told Forum 18.

Then they moved on to a second leader's house in the village. The leader told the men they could not search his house unless they showed a warrant. "That's when one of the men said they were from the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. But the leader said he needed to see proof." Then a larger group of men arrived to join the raid, including the hakim (head) of the district administration, the head of the collective farm and the local mullah. They threatened the leader and searched the house.

The final raid took place on the home of the church's pastor. However, after he refused absolutely to allow them inside his home without a warrant they searched the outside and the roof. They also threatened him. The pastor told them that if they were looking for Christian literature he was prepared to give them some. He then gave them some. "They threatened him with further problems and then left," Protestants told Forum 18.

However, the following day the local authorities called a meeting of children and parents at the village school, School No. 14. Protestant parents were singled out and told that if they and their children did not stop attending Protestant services their children would be expelled from school. They were also threatened that electricity, gas and water supplies would be cut off to their homes.

An even bigger public meeting was held on the evening of 22 May, Protestants told Forum 18. The whole village population was summoned. The meeting was led by hakimlik officials, with the collective farm chairman, the MSS secret police, the ordinary police and the local mullah also present.

"They read out the names of Christian parents, made them stand up and berated them. Again they were threatened that power and water would be cut off, that they would be sacked from their work and that they would not be allocated land to cultivate. They accused the Christians of conducting criminal activity and political activity against the government. They said they would do whatever it takes to crush and destroy them."

The pastor was allowed to address the meeting. "He explained that Christians are not criminals and that Christian teaching is good," Protestant sources told Forum 18. "But then the authorities tried to shut him up. He responded that as a citizen he had the right to speak. He told them the Christians are citizens of Turkmenistan and simply practising their rights. He also told them the church is on the way to getting state registration. The evening finished with more threats, with officials telling the Christians they could believe alone, but are banned from meeting together."

Protestants told Forum 18 that in the wake of the public meetings and threats, some non-Christian parents who had allowed their children to attend services have now changed their minds. "This is all because of the threats."

State attacks on Protestants have increased since the death of the former President Saparmurat Niyazov last December (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894). "The church in Dogryyol had not been touched for the last few years, but pressure has mounted this year," Protestants told Forum 18.

Sources pointed out that public meetings to humiliate religious believers, threats to expel religious believers from their work and cut off services, and the involvement of mullahs in threats and harassment recall the practice during the worst persecution from 1997 to 2003. "It seems the bad times are coming back."

Protestant congregations – especially those made up of ethnic Turkmens or of other minorities the government regards as being of Muslim background – have been singled out for harassment. Earlier this month, congregations in Turkmenabad and Dashoguz have faced raids and questioning. In the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), local Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was given a three-year labour camp sentence on 14 May, while five days later another local Baptist Yevgeny Potolov was arrested. Meanwhile, a Protestant from Dashoguz, Merdan Shirmedov, has been denied permission to leave Turkmenistan since January to join his wife Wendy Lucas in the United States. This meant he missed the birth of their first child on 18 May (see F18News 22 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=960). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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