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TURKMENISTAN: Jehovah's Witness jailed, Baptist family threatened with deportation

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witness Suleiman Udaev has been given an 18-month jail sentence for refusing military service, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Currently detained at a regional prison, he is "OK, healthy – but it is hard there, of course", his father told Forum 18. Udaev is being held in a 15 square metre (17 square yard) cell with 19 other prisoners, and is permitted one visit a month by his mother. She has been only able to see him through a window and speak via a telephone. "We can't give him anything," his father said. Following the expulsion of Baptist pastor Yevgeny Potolov in early July, his family are now being threatened with deportation themselves. During a raid by officials on Nadezhda Potolov's congregation, she was threatened with deportation, the congregation was forced to disperse and officials - apparently unaware that the congregation is Baptist – referred to "an illegal mob of Jehovah's Witnesses." Also, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, the recently released former Chief Mufti and former Deputy Chairman of the Council (Gengeshi) for Religious Affairs has been appointed as a "leading specialist" in the Gengeshi. No officials have been available to discuss these cases with Forum 18.

Jehovah's Witness Suleiman Udaev has been handed down an 18-month sentence for refusing military service on religious grounds, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Currently detained at the regional prison in Mary (365km or 230 miles south-east of Ashgabad), the 24-year-old is "OK, healthy – but it is hard there, of course", his father Annageldy told Forum 18 from the Turkmen capital on 14 August.

Mary District Court found Suleiman Udaev guilty of evading military service (Article 219, Part 1 of the Criminal Code) on 7 August. Present at the trial, Annageldy Udaev told Forum 18 that his son explained to the court that he rejects military service due to his religious beliefs. "He said that God forbids the taking up of arms to kill a person and the swearing of oaths. That we are Jehovah's Witnesses, and we cannot cause harm to another human being under to God's law." According to Annageldy Udaev, the judge then suggested that God's law might not be complete, "that He might issue another law to fight, to serve the motherland, and have forgotten about war." Although Suleiman replied that "God isn't a person, he decides everything once and for all and cannot make a mistake by forgetting something," the judge took no notice of his arguments and sentenced him to one-and-a-half years in prison, his father confirmed to Forum 18. Annageldy Udaev also said that his son appeared without a defence lawyer, because he did not believe one would help his case.

Detained since his trial in a 15 square metre (17 square yard) cell with 19 other prisoners, Suleiman Udaev is permitted one visit a month by his mother, according to his father. She visited him on 13 August but was only able to see him through a window and speak via a telephone, said Annageldy Udaev, "we can't give him anything".

Suleiman Udaev's father also told Forum 18 that his son is currently in debt after being fined the "huge sum" of 1,250,000 Manats (1,425 Norwegian Kroner, 178 Euros or 240 US Dollars at the inflated official bank rate) approximately one month ago for preaching. Threatened with the confiscation of his property, Suleiman borrowed money to pay the fine, according to his father. He did not know any further details about the fine.

The authorities have not yet made any move to prosecute up to ten other Jehovah's Witnesses – including Ilya Osipov and Mansur Masharipov – for refusing military service, Bayram Ashirgeldyyev told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 14 August. 20-year-old Ashirgeldyyev was given an 18 month suspended sentence and a fellow Jehovah's Witness, 27-year-old Aleksandr Zuyev, was given a two year suspended sentence in separate trials in the Turkmen capital in mid-July (see F18News 20 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=998). On 23 July, less than a week after being given an 18-month labour camp term for likewise refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, 27-year-old Jehovah's Witness Nuryagydy Gayyrov had his punishment reduced to a one-year suspended sentence (see F18News 26 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1000).

Bayram Ashirgeldyyev also told Forum 18 that he has been unable to obtain work since May 2006, when the local military commission refused to stamp his medical certificate attesting that he has heart problems. This would have confirmed to employers that he was exempt from military service and should be engaged in work taking into account his heart condition. When

Ashirgeldyyev obtained the certificate at the request of the military commission, he told Forum 18, it drew up its own diagnosis insisting that he is psychiatrically ill, but he refuses to accept this. Ashirgeldyyev believes that he will be amnestied in a couple of months, "but then they will find a new charge – I was warned in court that they would put me away for 11 years." While abiding by the conditions of his suspended sentence – the 20-year-old cannot travel outside Ashgabad and must be back each evening by 8pm – he told Forum 18 that this is so far not being enforced by police.

Jehovah's Witness young men insist they are ready to do alternative non-military service, but none is offered in Turkmenistan. Forum 18 has been unable to reach any officials who could explain why those unable to do military service on grounds of religious conscience cannot be offered alternative non-military service. The telephone of Aygozel Hezretova, head of the Legal Information Centre at the Adalat (Justice) Ministry, went unanswered on 15 August. So did that of Shemshat Atajanova of the presidential National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights.

Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky has not been released, remaining in a labour camp with harsh conditions. The 49-year-old Ukrainian citizen is serving a three-year sentence handed down on 14 May 2007 as a consequence of his religious activity (see F18News 13 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1006). A fellow Baptist pastor arrested with Kalataevsky, Russian citizen Yevgeny Potolov was expelled from Turkmenistan in early July (see F18News 18 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=996).

Potolov's wife and children have now been threatened with deportation, the Baptist Council of Churches stated today (15 August). During a 12 August evening raid on home worship by its congregation in the western port city of Turkmenbashi, two local officials and the city imam declared the gathering illegal, demanded identification documents from all present and told Nadezhda Potolov that they would deport her as she holds a residency permit rather than Turkmen citizenship. A Visa Department official and two employees of the Foreign Citizen State Registration Service reportedly arrived soon afterwards, but - apparently unaware that the congregation is Baptist – they drew up a protocol referring to "an illegal mob of Jehovah's Witnesses".

Forum 18 has again been unable to reach any officials who were willing to discuss the case.

The Potolov family moved to Turkmenbashi in 1998. Both Yevgeny Potolov and Vyacheslav Kalataevsky had their residency permits stripped from them in June 2001 on orders of the local administration chief in punishment for their religious activity in the city.

The Baptist Council of Churches, to which the two pastors are affiliated, rejects state registration in all the former Soviet republics where it operates. It believes that registration leads to unwarranted state interference in the internal life of congregations and unacceptable restrictions on their activities. Protestants within Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 of numerous unwritten controls on registered communities, including forced co-operation with the MSS secret police (see F18News 16 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728). Many communities are therefore reluctant to apply for registration (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787).

Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, the former Chief Mufti and Deputy Chairman until January 2003 of the Council (Gengeshi) for Religious Affairs has been reappointed to the Gengeshi. The Altyn Asyr state television channel broadcast him on 13 August thanking President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov for his pardon and announcing that he has already been appointed as a "leading specialist" at the Gengeshi. "With all my strength, day and night, I will serve the Great Almighty Allah, my motherland, my people and my esteemed president," he stated. Three years into a 22-year sentence - on charges the government refused to make public – he was freed from prison on 9 August (see F18News 13 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1006).

The Gengeshi has a key role in monitoring and suppressing Turkmen citizens who exercise their right to religious freedom. Since Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov became President in early 2007, raids, fines, public threats, imprisonment and other violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief have significantly increased. (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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