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TURKMENISTAN: Why can't believers freely enter, leave or remain in the country?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

As in previous years it appears that the government will allow only 188 Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca this year directly from Turkmenistan. "Only those on the official list who have been approved by the Cabinet of Ministers will go to Mecca on the one aeroplane," one source told Forum 18 News Service from Ashgabad. Would-be pilgrims must present an application form to their imam, who hands it to the regional authorities who pass it on to Ashgabad, a Muslim told Forum 18 from Turkmenbashi. He said two or three pilgrims are travelling this year from the city, while the waiting list is long. Meanwhile, the daughter of a Baptist pastor expelled from Turkmenistan in 2007 was herself obliged to leave in early November, despite being married to a Turkmen citizen. By contrast, relatives of another Baptist former prisoner were banned from leaving for Russia in the summer when they arrived at the airport. The new Moscow-based Russian Orthodox bishop for Turkmenistan is planning to make his first ever visit to the country.

As has been the practice for many years, it appears that only 188 Muslim pilgrims are being allowed to take part directly from Turkmenistan in this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca which begins later this month, Forum 18 News Service has learned. "Only those on the official list who have been approved by the Cabinet of Ministers will go to Mecca on the one aeroplane," one source told Forum 18 on 19 November from the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. "The government draws up the list and orders the aeroplane."

The numbers of genuine pilgrims actually permitted is almost certainly smaller than 188, as Forum 18 has been informed that members of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police are included among the pilgrims.

The government often prevents those it does not like – including prominent religious believers – from leaving the country. The government has also expelled from the country over recent years active members of religious communities who do not hold Turkmen passports, even if they have been living in the country for many years. Obligated to leave Turkmenistan at the beginning of November because of the authorities' repeated refusal to issue a residence permit was Tatyana Kalataevskaya, the daughter of an expelled Baptist pastor.

At the same time, Turkmenistan's strict entry criteria prevent local religious communities from freely inviting their fellow-believers from abroad, leaving them often isolated from international contacts.

The government website reported on 4 November that President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov had signed a decree arranging for 188 pilgrims to travel on the haj between 24 November and 14 December. It said the national airline, Turkmenistan Airlines, had been ordered to organise a special flight on a Boeing 757 to Saudi Arabia and back, which the airline itself was to pay for.

The quota for pilgrims assigned to Turkmenistan by the Saudi government has never been officially announced, but is believed to be about 5,000. Turkmenistan has a population of some 6 million, the majority of them of Muslim background.

This year the mainly-Muslim southern Russian region of Dagestan – with a population of some 2.5 million – is expecting to send at least 8,000 pilgrims from Russia's quota, with the Dagestani government hoping to send even more. Uzbekistan – with a population of some 27 million - is expecting to send 5,000 pilgrims, while Kyrgyzstan – with a population of more than 5 million - is expecting to send 4,500.

The haj pilgrimage is compulsory at least once in their lifetime for Muslims who are able to perform it (there are exemptions, for example for ill health) within Dhu al-Hijja, the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar. However, given that for many years the Turkmen authorities have allowed no more than 188 pilgrims each year, this is an obligation that the vast majority of the country's Muslims are unable to fulfil.

The Turkmen authorities have never explained why they allow only one aeroplane of pilgrims to travel. However, for the 2007 pilgrimage they claimed that in addition to the official party, pilgrims were allowed to travel on the haj independently. But the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad confirmed to Forum 18 in 2007 that the only pilgrims directly from Turkmenistan were those on the

officially-sponsored aeroplane (see F18News 14 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1062).

Diplomats at the Saudi Arabian Embassy refused to tell Forum 18 on 12 November what this year's quota for pilgrims from Turkmenistan is, nor how many haj visas it has issued. An official of the Iranian Embassy in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 19 November that it was his understanding that only the official aeroplane is authorised by the Turkmen authorities to take pilgrims on the haj. He said his embassy is willing to give transit visas to haj pilgrims, but that restrictions are "from the Turkmen side".

No one at the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs was prepared to explain the procedures to Forum 18 on 17, 18 or 19 November or why so few pilgrims out of the country's quota are allowed to go. The man who answered the phone of deputy chairman Nurmukhamed Gurbanov on 18 November immediately hung up as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Also hanging up on 18 November after Forum 18 had introduced itself was the woman who answered the phone of Shirin Akhmedova, the head of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights.

Nor were any officials of local hyakimliks in several districts of Ashgabad or in several other cities prepared to explain the procedures to Forum 18.

One Ashgabad-based source told Forum 18 on 19 November that the Cabinet of Ministers makes all the arrangements, through the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs. The source said would-be pilgrims have their documents processed through the local religious affairs official in the hyakimlik (administration) where they live, though all the decisions on who may or may not travel are taken in Ashgabad. "The procedure is not published," the source lamented. As in previous years, the MSS secret police is also involved in the selection of pilgrims (see F18News 14 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1062).

A Muslim in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] told Forum 18 that Muslims who want to go on the haj must fill in an application form and hand it to the city's imam. The imam then passes on the application to the velayat (regional) authorities, who then process the application from there. Would-be pilgrims have to present their passport and local residence registration with the application.

"People are then added to the queue – which is about 1,000 long here in Turkmenbashi," the Muslim told Forum 18 on 19 November. "I'm in the queue, but I haven't asked what number I'm at. Some people on the list become ill, so can't travel when their name comes up, so someone else is then able to go." The Muslim would not say how many years those on the local list have to wait for a place to become available. He said that two or three pilgrims are travelling on this year's haj from Turkmenbashi, a city with a population of some 70,000.

On 11 November Deutsche Welle's Central Asian service quoted one would-be pilgrim as declaring that the authorities deliberately choose the most "loyal" Muslims to go on the official list, and select Sunnis rather than Muslims from the minority Shia community. It added that the authorities do not want those who have studied Islam in Turkey or Pakistan to increase their authority and influence by going on the haj.

Deutsche Welle adds that some would-be pilgrims make their way to Turkey without telling the Turkmen authorities that they are going on the haj. They then make arrangements from there. Sources have also told Forum 18 of such independent would-be pilgrims who travel to third countries in a bid to travel on the haj.

Meanwhile, Tatyana Kalataevskaya, the daughter of Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, had to leave Turkmenistan on 1 November, the family told Forum 18 from Ukraine on 17 November. "She wasn't forced to leave, but the Turkmen authorities did nothing to allow her to remain," the family reported. They say the Migration Service visited her at her home in Ashgabad and promised a residence permit by the end of October. However, they said later that no order had been received "from above" to issue the permit so they could not do so.

"The authorities didn't say why they were not giving permission – we can only guess that the reason is religious," the family told Forum 18, "because of everything they did to our family."

Kalataevskaya was born in Ukraine but went to live in Turkmenistan in 1999 when her family returned there. In what the family believes is part of government pressure on it, Kalataevskaya was among family members denied a residence permit in 2005. Without a residence permit her marriage to a Turkmen citizen could not be registered officially. Their two children were born in Turkmenistan.

Kalataevsky – a Ukrainian citizen who led an independent Baptist congregation in his native city of Turkmenbashi – was imprisoned from March 2007. Freed in November 2007 he was forced to leave Turkmenistan the following month after the authorities refused his application to remain with his wife and children. Before his enforced departure, officials warned Kalataevsky that any services his church held would be illegal and tried to force him to sign a statement declaring that it would not meet (see F18News 21 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1050).

"Although my father and brother still live in Turkmenistan, my return is closed," Kalataevsky told Forum 18. "All methods of return

are blocked."

Fellow-Baptist Yevgeny Potolov, also from Turkmenbashi and a Russian citizen, was arrested soon after Kalataevsky. He was deported from Turkmenistan in July 2007 (see F18News 15 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1008).

Barred from leaving Turkmenistan in June was Artygul Atakova, wife of former Baptist prisoner Shageldy Atakov. Baptists told Forum 18 that she and six of her children had tickets for the flight to Russia, where she was due to have medical treatment. Although all their tickets and documents were in order, all seven were refused permission to check in and board the flight at Ashgabad Airport. When her husband asked for a written explanation of why she and the children were barred from travelling, officials responded: "The MSS secret police have given us an order not to allow you and your family out of the country."

The Atakov family – all of them Turkmen citizens – live in the village of Kaakhka near Ashgabad.

In May 2006 Atakov was due to fly to Moscow to meet fellow Baptists. He already had a ticket, had passed through passport control at Ashgabad Airport and was sitting in the aeroplane when officers of the MSS secret police took him off the flight shortly before takeoff was due. The Migration Service told Forum 18 he was denied permission to leave because he was on the exit black list (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

Atakov was imprisoned for his faith on trumped-up charges from December 1998 to January 2002. He was freed early after the Turkmen government bowed to international pressure. However, to the surprise of officials, Atakov rejected the government's offer for him to emigrate. He is now suffering from diabetes which he attributes to the years of maltreatment in prison, Baptists told Forum 18.

Forum 18 knows of one other Protestant Christian from a town away from Ashgabad who has been prevented from leaving Turkmenistan in 2008. No explanation for the travel ban has been given.

However, some of those who earlier have been barred from leaving Turkmenistan to punish them for their religious activity have been able to travel abroad this year. Sources told Forum 18 that one Ashgabad-based Hare Krishna devotee was allowed to travel to India in early 2008 to take part in the Gaura Purnima (Golden Full Moon) festival – the first time the devotee had been able to travel abroad for many years. The devotee had earlier been given a five-year foreign travel ban "with no explanation". However, the devotee was not allowed to re-enter Turkmenistan with any religious books.

Jehovah's Witnesses report no progress in the planned visit of a foreign delegation to the country to meet local Jehovah's Witnesses and to discuss the situation of their communities with officials. "We're very much interested in having a delegation go," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from elsewhere in Central Asia on 19 November. "We want to discuss with higher officials and remove any possible misunderstandings." They report that earlier contacts with the Turkmen Embassy in Washington DC have not led to any offers of visas.

The last known visit to Turkmenistan by a clergyman of the Armenian Apostolic Church was back in 1999, although the country has a long-standing ethnic Armenian minority. Members of the community have made attempts to restart religious activity but the authorities have always rejected these attempts (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787).

A handful of foreign visitors invited by local religious communities have been able to come to Turkmenistan. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church told Forum 18 that Artur Stele (who leads the Euro-Asia Division of the Church) and his wife Galina were able to visit the local church from Russia in September, the first time any Adventist leader has been able to visit the country with an official work visa in more than eight years.

One foreign religious leader with pastoral oversight in Turkmenistan who has not yet visited the country is Bishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of the Russian Orthodox Church. The 34-year-old bishop was named by the Holy Synod on 6 October as the first head of the Patriarchal Deanery, the body overseeing the dozen or so Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan under the authority of Patriarch Aleksy. Although the news was reported on the pro-government Turkmenistan.ru website, Forum 18 has been unable to find any local Turkmen media which published news within the country of Bishop Feofilakt's appointment.

The parishes in Turkmenistan were transferred by the Holy Synod in October 2007 from the jurisdiction of the Central Asian Diocese based in the Uzbek capital Tashkent after heavy pressure from the Turkmen authorities (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037).

Bishop Feofilakt told Forum 18 from Moscow on 7 November that he has never visited Turkmenistan. He added that he was planning his first visit and was preparing to lodge his visa application with the Turkmen embassy in Moscow.

Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Department of External Church Relations at the Patriarchate, visited Turkmenistan in May 2008, the first time a Russian Orthodox bishop visited the country since Metropolitan Vladimir of Tashkent made a short pastoral visit in 2003 while the parishes were within his jurisdiction.

Finally able to visit Turkmenistan at the government's invitation in September 2008 was Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Jahangir's predecessor, Abdelfattah Amor, requested permission to visit in 2003, but received no response. Jahangir renewed the request in 2005, eventually leading to the September visit.

Jahangir said in Ashgabad at the conclusion of her visit that she was told by "virtually all" of her interlocutors "that the situation has much improved since 2007". However, she added that "individuals and religious communities still face a number of difficulties when manifesting their freedom of religion or belief". She pointed to the continuing ban on unregistered religious worship, "vague provisions" in the Religion Law that could lead to misuse, restrictions on religious literature, restrictions on building, opening and renting places of worship, and the lack of an alternative to compulsory military service.

In contrast to her 5 September meeting with President Berdymukhamedov, which was widely reported on local television and the press, Jahangir's final press conference and statement went unreported in Turkmenistan's government-controlled media.

Human Rights Watch is aware of at least three incidents in which representatives of three different religious communities in Ashgabad were warned by the security services not to meet Jahangir during her visit. (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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

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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