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TURKMENISTAN: Exit bans, haj ban, visa denials part of state religious isolation policy

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Taken off an aeroplane in the capital Ashgabad just before departure in October 2007, Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev has been unable to leave Turkmenistan since. Like many who are on the exit blacklist, the Migration Service refuses to tell him why. He told Forum 18 News Service the ban could only have been imposed to punish him for his religious activity. The exit blacklist is part of the Turkmen government's long-standing policy of trying to isolate religious communities within the country from their fellow-believers abroad, which has included expelling legally resident foreigners who engaged in religious activity. In 2009 it banned even the small number of Muslims allowed to go on the haj pilgrimage to leave for Mecca, citing health grounds. One foreign Protestant told Forum 18 the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs refused to authorise a planned visit to fellow believers in Turkmenistan in 2009. Local people who are able to travel abroad face routine confiscation of religious literature on their return, which is often destroyed.

Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev of Light to the World Pentecostal church in the south-eastern town of Mary has complained to Forum 18 News Service that despite repeated attempts he has been unable to overturn the exit ban imposed on him in October 2007. "I was taken off the aeroplane at Ashgabad airport that month and told I was banned from travelling abroad," he told Forum 18 from Mary on 25 January. When he asked why, he was told: "You know the reason yourself." He said the ban could only have been imposed to punish him for his religious activity.

Pastor Nurliev is among many Turkmen citizens to be on the exit blacklist maintained by the country's Migration Service on behalf of the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. Forum 18 was unable to reach any official at the Migration Service in Ashgabad on 1 February.

State claims it guarantees freedom of movement

In its report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, submitted on 11 January, the Turkmen government blandly claimed that it guarantees the right to freedom of movement (see report CCPR/C/TKM1 at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/hrcs_future.htm). "In accordance with Turkmenistan's Law on Migration, every citizen of Turkmenistan has the right to leave Turkmenistan and enter Turkmenistan," Article 431 of the report declares. "A citizen of Turkmenistan cannot be deprived of the right to leave Turkmenistan and enter Turkmenistan."

State policy contradicts state claims

The government report made no mention of the exit blacklist which has prevented some religious believers, human rights defenders and students at foreign universities from leaving the country.

The exit blacklist is part of the Turkmen government's long-standing policy of trying to isolate religious communities within the country as far as possible from their fellow-believers abroad. The policy has also included banning all but 188 Muslims from travelling on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca each year (though in 2009 even this was not allowed), expelling legally-resident foreigners who are active in religious communities and refusing to allow foreign religious believers to visit their fellow-believers inside Turkmenistan (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

An official has confirmed to Forum 18 that the exit blacklist is run by the Migration Service, sometimes in conjunction with the MSS secret police who can also impose exit bans (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

Complaints to Migration Service fail

Pastor Nurliev tried to find out from the Migration Service in Ashgabad why it has banned him from travelling abroad and to overturn the ban. In its most recent reply, dated 4 July 2009, Sh. Akmuradova of the Migration Service wrote to him confirming that

he was banned from leaving but failing to answer his question as to why.

"My sister lives in Belarus and I want to travel to see her," Nurliev told Forum 18. "She is an invalid in a wheelchair, while her husband has no legs. So they can't come here."

Pastor Nurliev was fined for religious activity back in 2008, while pressure from officials on members of his church has continued (see F18News 1 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1401).

Also still banned from leaving Turkmenistan is former Baptist prisoner of conscience Shageldy Atakov, as well as his wife and all nine of their children. "The Migration Service won't reply to my letters, while verbally officials say this is being examined," he told Forum 18 on 25 January the village of Kaakhka near Ashgabad. "But nothing has been resolved. We pray that it will be."

Atakov discovered he was on the exit blacklist when the MSS secret police took him off an aeroplane at Ashgabad airport just before departure in May 2006. His wife Artygul and six of their children were similarly barred from leaving from Ashgabad airport in June 2008 despite having valid tickets (see F18News 11 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1293).

Atakov also told Forum 18 that since its coverage of moves in April and May 2009 to seize property from him to cover money the authorities claim he owes, no further action has been taken against him.

The authorities claim that Atakov owes another individual 12,000 US Dollars over a 1995 transaction, for which he was subsequently imprisoned. He and his fellow Baptists insist he was innocent of all charges. The authorities began making the claims three years after the alleged fraud, after Atakov became a Christian in 1998.

Nevertheless, officials in Kaakhka continue to insist to Atakov that he cannot invite others to join his family for worship. "They told me I can only pray within my family," he told Forum 18.

Forum 18 knows of two other Protestants who were barred from leaving Turkmenistan in autumn 2009.

Airport checks and confiscations

Turkmenistan imposes strict censorship of religious literature within the country and at the state borders (see F18News 12 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294). Although the customs declaration required to be filled in by every traveller contains no specific question on religious literature, a notice in the arrivals hall at Ashgabad airport in both Turkmen and Russian reminds travellers that "religious literature of any character" is banned, unless specific approval is given by the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs.

Baggage is usually checked by three officers, one from customs, one soldier and one in civilian clothes, generally believed to be from the MSS secret police. "Each checks their own speciality and each checks each other," one Turkmen told Forum 18. "The officer in civilian clothes checks the religious literature." Such literature is seized whether it is in Turkmen, Russian, Arabic or any other language. It is only on rare occasions that, once discovered, religious literature is not confiscated.

When religious literature is seized, officials are supposed to give the traveller a receipt itemising each title confiscated and the quantity. They are supposed to send the literature to the Gengeshi for "expert analysis" as to whether it is authorised. "Gengeshi officials know Turkmen, Russian and Arabic," the Turkmen recounted. "Occasionally they will give back a personal copy of the Koran or Bible."

Several Turkmen have told Forum 18 that even if permission to import a religious work is not granted, it is theoretically possible to retrieve the book on leaving Turkmenistan within the following three months. "But customs tell us that in response to a Presidential decree all confiscated literature is destroyed," one told Forum 18.

One Protestant told Forum 18 that after the confiscation of eleven Bibles on return to the country in late 2008, the customs chief at the airport said that all had been destroyed.

Another Protestant wrote to the Gengeshi trying to get a list of religious literature it has banned. "But they wouldn't even accept my letter – they said go to the agency that confiscated your books," the Protestant lamented. "They said we're just an analytical body that gives its opinions and sends the books back."

Not only are books and CDs seized. Bracelets with religious inscriptions (including Muslim and Christian) are known to have been confiscated. One Turkmen told Forum 18 that he saw a carpet with a Muslim inscription in Arabic being confiscated. Customs officers are particularly keen to search computers and data sticks of known religious believers.

One Protestant told Forum 18 that after a personal computer was confiscated at Ashgabad airport in 2008, it took three weeks to retrieve. "It had been sent to the Gengeshi and to get it back I had to pay a 'storage' fee of 600,000 Manats [then worth 800

Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 115 US Dollars]," the Protestant complained. "I had to pay this otherwise the computer wouldn't have been returned. When I got it back, all the religious materials had been cleaned off it."

Known religious believers targeted

Known religious believers who are allowed to travel abroad have their status marked on their record on the computer database accessible to border guards at departure points, including Ashgabad airport, several religious believers have confirmed to Forum 18. "The computer records who they are and what role they have." This allows officials to scrutinise their baggage very closely on both departure and return.

"The first question customs asked me was: Do you have a Bible?" one Protestant who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 of a return through Ashgabad airport in late 2009. "I was the only one they put this question to. They were waiting for me." The Protestant's personal Bible was confiscated.

Although checks on the contents of cars and the baggage of passengers on trains within Turkmenistan have lessened in recent years, religious believers have complained to Forum 18 that on occasion religious literature discovered after x-rays of personal baggage on internal flights has been confiscated.

Forum 18 was unable to reach any official at the Gengeshi between 28 January and 1 February prepared to answer any questions. Nor was any official of the Border Service prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 2 February. Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at the Customs Service or MSS secret police.

The 2009 haj ban

The government suddenly halted the exit on the November 2009 haj pilgrimage of the small contingent of 188 Muslims, citing concerns about the H1N1 virus. Instead the government sent the pilgrims (at its own expense) on an "internal pilgrimage" to various religious and non-religious sites within the country.

One Ashgabad resident, some of whose relatives had been scheduled to go on the haj, described the government-sponsored "internal pilgrimage" as a perversion of the long-standing local tradition of visiting Muslim holy sites within Turkmenistan. The government-sponsored media linked the "internal pilgrimage" to promotion of what it deemed the achievements of President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's "New Revival" era.

However, the Ashgabad resident believes that the sudden cancellation of the 2009 haj was decided over genuine health concerns, adding that there is no reason to believe that the government will prevent the small group of pilgrims going in 2010 "though with our government it is impossible to give guarantees".

Turkmenistan's haj quota is believed to be about 5,000, but for many years only about 188 pilgrims have been allowed to travel each year - one aeroplane load (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

Would-be haj pilgrims have to gain "recommendations" from the religious leadership in their place of residence. "All the names of candidates then go to the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs and there they draw up the final lists," the Ashgabad resident explained. "I know many people who want to go at their own expense, especially as Turkmenistan sends fewer than the Saudi authorities allow. But people cannot go at their own expense – the Turkmen authorities don't give permission."

Few requests for foreign visitors granted

At the same time, only a few foreign members of less state-disfavoured religious communities are allowed to visit. One such is Bishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of Smolensk, who oversees the twelve Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan on behalf of the Russian Patriarch. He was allowed to make three pastoral visits to Turkmenistan in 2009, during which he consecrated two churches, in Tejen and Abadan (the first such consecrations since 1997). Also allowed to visit in 2009 were two Baha'is, as well as two members of the New Apostolic Church from Germany. One foreign Protestant was also able to visit in December 2009.

However, local religious communities can only invite foreigners if they have state registration and even then need the permission of the Gengeshi for such visits, which is very difficult to obtain. Many communities have tried to invite fellow-believers from abroad for many years without success. One foreign Protestant told Forum 18 the Gengeshi refused to authorise his planned visit in 2009. Visas to Turkmenistan for those suspected of wanting to visit for religious purposes are often refused. Those that do manage to get visas and get into the country risk deportation if they are discovered visiting religious communities. (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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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