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TURKMENISTAN: "Ilmurad will pray and praise God at Christmas in the labour camp"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan has not released any of its nine known religious prisoners of conscience in its latest prisoner amnesty, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The latest prisoner of conscience sentenced for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief - Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, given a four year jail term with forcible "medical" treatment in October – is amongst those excluded. Among the other prisoners of conscience also excluded is Ahmet Hodaybergenov, a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector sentenced to one and a half years in September. Pastor Nurliev's wife Maya – who is under MSS secret police surveillance – told Forum 18 that her husband has been sent to Seydi Labour Camp. Previous Baptists and Jehovah's Witness prisoners in the Camp appear to have been tortured with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs, and a former prisoner of conscience described conditions in the Camp as "like something from the Middle Ages". Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 that "Ilmurad will pray and praise God at Christmas in the labour camp – he has composed hymns and songs in Turkmen and Russian".

None of the nine known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan – one Protestant pastor and eight Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors – were included in the prisoner amnesty of 10 December, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Nor were the further three Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors serving non-custodial sentences. Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev's family had been expecting his release. "Five of us – including Ilmurad's sister - were waiting outside the investigation prison in Mary on 13 December for him to come out," his wife Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 on 19 December. "Fifty or so prisoners came out, but not Ilmurad. One of the prisoners said prison staff had marked his name on the list as someone not to release."

Maya Nurlieva said her husband had been deliberately excluded from the amnesty. "We know that the investigation prison staff had put his name on the list, but the Ministry of State Security [MSS secret police] removed it because of his faith."

She added that on 16 December, her husband had been transferred to the labour camp at Seydi in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan. "People who've been imprisoned there told us conditions are very bad," she told Forum 18. "For the first ten days he is being held in quarantine, allowed no contact with or food from his family."

Baptist and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience have previously been held in Seydi Labour Camp. There have been indications that some of these prisoners were tortured in the camp with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Turkmenistan's government systematically violates the freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental human rights of all the country's citizens, including followers of the majority Muslim faith and followers of other religious faiths (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

"Ilmurad will pray and praise God at Christmas in the labour camp"

She lamented that he will be held there for Christmas, which their church marks on 25 and 26 December. "Ilmurad will pray and praise God at Christmas in the labour camp barrack – he has composed hymns and songs in Turkmen and Russian." She said he has never been allowed a Bible – or even a New Testament – since he was arrested on 27 August. "We put a pocket New Testament into the parcels we were allowed to pass on to him in the investigation prison, but each time it was returned with no explanation. At least he knows much of the Bible by heart."

Maya Nurlieva – who last saw her husband on 30 November, when they were separated by glass and had to talk in the presence of guards through a telephone - repeated her earlier concerns about her husband's health. He suffers from diabetes and was undergoing regular treatment in hospital before his arrest. This and medication was denied to him after his arrest in August.

The verdict at his trial also specified forcible medical treatment for what the court claimed was drug addiction, an allegation his family and his church vigorously refute. No known independent medical evidence supports the Court's allegation or its "treatment" (see F18News 21 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1501).

Maya Nurlieva said she does not know if the authorities have forcibly treated him in the investigation prison in Mary or in Seydi Labour Camp.

Pastor Nurliev, a 45-year-old grandfather of two, leads Light to the World Protestant Church in Mary east of the capital Ashgabad. He was barred from leaving Turkmenistan in 2007, while his church has been denied state registration. In a police raid on his home in February 2009, some 225 Christian cassettes and DVDs were confiscated. "Police told us they would analyse them over the next ten days and then return them if there was nothing harmful in them," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18. "They never returned them." Such confiscations are routine throughout the country (see F18News 12 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294).

Nurliev was finally arrested on 27 August 2010 and tried on 21 October, when he was given a four year prison sentence on charges of swindling. His wife and his church, as well as other Protestants from elsewhere in Turkmenistan who know him, insist the charges were fabricated to punish him for his religious activity. "One thing shines through from this sordid tale: no church member betrayed their pastor and almost all came to the court," Ashgabad-based human rights defender Natalya Shabunts wrote in the wake of the trial – in which there was apparent fabrication of evidence and numerous breaches of published legal procedure (see F18News 8 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1507).

A group of local Protestant pastors wrote to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in Ashgabad in mid-December, repeating their call for assistance in gaining Nurliev's freedom. An OSCE legal review of the current Religion Law has strongly criticised it for violating international human rights standards (see F18News 20 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1523).

Jehovah's Witnesses also excluded from amnesty

Also not included in the December amnesty to mark Neutrality Day were the Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. Sources in Ashgabad told Forum 18 that the names of the eight prisoners and three serving non-custodial sentences were not included in the list of 1,986 prisoners to be freed, published in central state newspapers on 10 December.

The eight prisoners – the brothers Sakhemurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, Shadurdi Ushotov, Akmurat Egendurdiev, Navruz Nasyrlyayev, Aziz Roziyev, Dovleyet Byashimov and Ahmet Hudaybergenov – are serving sentences of between 18 months and two years' imprisonment. All are being held in Seydi labour camp where Pastor Nurliev has been sent.

Likewise not freed were the three Jehovah's Witnesses serving non-custodial sentences: Zafar Abdullaev, Dovran Kushmanov and Denis Petrenko.

The eleven Jehovah's Witnesses were all sentenced under Article 219 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment (see F18News 4 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495).

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to compulsory military service for young men. This is despite repeated calls, including most recently in a June 2010 OSCE review of Turkmenistan's current Religion Law, made public by the OSCE on 6 December (see F18News 20 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1523).

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, the new Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 20 and 22 December.

MSS secret police surveillance of Pastor's wife

Maya Nurlieva also told Forum 18 that she is being subjected to open surveillance whenever she leaves her home in Mary. "A BMW car with tinted rear windows sits outside our home with a young man at the wheel, and follows me when I go out," she complained. She also believes her telephone is being listened to.

However, she said the authorities have not pressured other church members since the investigation was completed ahead of her husband's trial.

Seydi labour camp "like something from the Middle Ages"

The Seydi general regime camp – where the nine current religious prisoners of conscience are being held - was described to Forum 18 by former Baptist religious prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky as "like something from the Middle Ages".

The Association of Independent Advocates of Turkmenistan, an exile group, told Forum 18 that the camp, some six kms (four miles) from Seydi in the desert, is designed to hold 2,100 prisoners. It said there is also a special regime camp nearby designed for 700

prisoners.

Kalataevsky recalled that in 2007, when he was imprisoned at the camp, there were then some 3,500 prisoners in six or seven barracks. He said the temperature in the summer is close to being unbearably hot. He said prisoners under 50 year of age work ten hour days (with a lunch break) in the camp's industrial zone, in the brick factory, metalworking plant or clothing factory. He said food and water is adequate "though not wonderful" (see F18News 30 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1356).

An earlier Baptist prisoner there, Shageldy Atakov, was apparently tortured while in the camp with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs before being freed in 2002. Jehovah's Witness prisoners were also apparently similarly tortured (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438). In 2004, two Jehovah's Witness prisoners there were threatened with death (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

More recently, four of the then five Jehovah's Witness prisoners being held in Seydi labour camp were punished in late 2009 and early 2010 – including one-month terms in the camp isolation punishment cells. Local Jehovah's Witnesses interpreted these punishments as a move to make them ineligible for the Victory Day amnesty declared by the President in May (see F18News 24 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1448).

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

(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=1512.

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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