

29 April 2011

TURKMENISTAN: Eleven religious prisoners of conscience in one camp

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The arrival at the Seydi Labour Camp in eastern Turkmenistan of Sunet Japbarov and Dovran Matyakubov, Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors, brought to eleven the number of religious prisoners of conscience held in this camp, Forum 18 News Service notes. Ten are conscientious objectors. Japbarov and Matyakubov each received 18-month prison terms in December 2010 for refusing compulsory military service. Concern is mounting among his friends for another of the religious prisoners in the Seydi Camp, Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev. The Labour Camp administration has refused to allow him medical treatment for his diabetes, for which he regularly visited a hospital before his August 2010 arrest. "Our first aim is restoring his health," his friends told Forum 18. Police who summoned members of his unregistered congregation warned: "if we find out the church has been meeting, we'll do the same to you as we did to Ilmurad".

Two young Jehovah's Witnesses have been transferred to the prison camp at Seydi in eastern Turkmenistan after being sentenced for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. Sunet Japbarov and Dovran Matyakubov were sentenced in December 2010. They joined nine other religious prisoners of conscience already in the same Seydi Labour Camp: eight Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors; and one Protestant pastor, Ilmurad Nurliev. However, another Jehovah's Witness facing criminal trial for refusing military service had the case dropped on health grounds.

Jehovah's Witness young men have repeatedly expressed a readiness to perform an alternative, civilian service not under military control.

Conscientious objection to military service a crime

Turkmenistan currently has no alternative service, and those who cannot perform military service on grounds of conscience are prosecuted under Article 219 Part 1 of the Criminal Code. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment.

International bodies have repeatedly called on the Turkmen government to introduce an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Most recently, such a call was included in a highly-critical legal review of the current Religion Law by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), completed in June 2010 but not made public until the following December (see F18News 20 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1523).

Turkmenistan's government has failed to respond to a February 2010 "urgent appeal" from the United Nations on the continued imprisonment of conscientious objectors (see F18News 9 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1550).

Reached on 29 April, Pirnazar Hudainazarov, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, once again refused to discuss whether Turkmenistan will introduce such an alternative service. "You must address your questions to the Mejlis via our Foreign Ministry," he repeatedly told Forum 18, without explaining why. He then put the phone down.

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Committee) for Religious Affairs, went unanswered on 29 April, as did telephones at the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in Ashgabad.

Two conscientious objectors sentenced ..

Japbarov, a 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness from the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew), refused his call-up to compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Prosecutors brought a criminal case against him under Article 219 Part 1. On 14 December 2010 he was sentenced by Turkmenabad City Court to 18 months' imprisonment, fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Matyakubov, an 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness from the north-eastern Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] Region, similarly refused his call-up to compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Prosecutors brought a criminal case against him under Article 219, Part 1. On 28 December 2010 he was sentenced by Boldumsaz District Court to 18 months' imprisonment, fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

After their sentencing they was transferred to the Labour Camp near Seydi in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan where all the other religious prisoners of conscience have been held.

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

.. and one exempted on health grounds

A criminal case was also launched under Article 219 Part 1 against fellow Dashoguz Jehovah's Witness Yadgyar Sharipov, also 18 years old, after he too refused military service on grounds of conscience. However, the military enlistment office later exempted him from military service on health grounds, and the prosecution dropped the case without bringing it to court.

The exemption from military service was temporary, and it remains unknown whether the authorities will seek to call Sharipov up again.

Eleven current religious prisoners of conscience

The ten known imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were all sentenced under Article 219 Part 1. They are: Sakhmetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, two years each, Serdar Court, May 2009; Shadurdi Ushotov, two years, Dashoguz Court, July 2009; Navruz Nasyrlayev, two years, Dashoguz Court, December 2009; Aziz Roziyev, 18 months, Seydi Court, August 2010; Dovleyet Byashimov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, August 2010; Ahmet Hudaybergenov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, September 2010; Sunet Japbarov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, December 2010; Matkarim Aminov, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, December 2010; and Dovran Matyakubov, 18 months, Boldumsaz Court, December 2010.

Numbers of prisoners of conscience have been increasing since President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov came to power (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

Sakhmetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, who are brothers, are due for release in May at the end of their sentences.

The eleventh known religious prisoner of conscience is Pastor Nurliev, who leads Light to the World Protestant Church in the town of Mary east of Ashgabad. Arrested in August 2010, he was given a four-year labour camp term in October 2010 with "forcible medical treatment" on charges of swindling. His community insist the charges were fabricated to punish him for his religious activity. He had tried in vain to register his church. In December 2010 he was transferred to the Seydi Labour Camp (see F18News 22 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1525).

Neither Pastor Nurliev nor the Jehovah's Witnesses were freed under prisoner amnesties, including the most recent declared in February (see F18News 9 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1550).

In addition, three Jehovah's Witnesses have been serving suspended sentences under Article 219 Part 1: Zafar Abdullaev and Dovran Kushmanov, two years each, Dashoguz, April 2009; Denis Petrenko, two years, Ashgabad, April 2010. This required them to live under some restrictions at home and report regularly to the authorities.

Abdullaev was released from his sentence on its completion on 8 April, Jehovah's Witnesses confirmed to Forum 18. Kushmanov's sentence also expired in April.

Health concern for imprisoned pastor

Friends of Pastor Nurliev are increasingly concerned about his health in the Seydi Camp, they told Forum 18. "Our first aim is restoring his health."

Nurliev, a 46-year-old grandfather of two, suffers from diabetes and had regular treatment at the hospital in Mary before his imprisonment. The labour camp administration will only allow treatment for him if he has a certificate from the hospital, but the hospital will only give such a certificate if he comes in person. The camp administration has refused to put Nurliev in the Camp's medical unit.

Meanwhile, adding to the family's difficulties, Nurliev's wife Maya was sacked from her job at a local firm in March, after she took unpaid leave to travel. Heavy pressure, including threats to dismissal from employment, has been applied by the authorities against Nurlieva and other church members (see F18News 8 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1507). Also, Nurlieva had been denied any opportunity to ensure Nurliev himself received the diabetic medicines he needed since his August 2010 arrest (see F18News 21 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1501).

"We'll do the same to you as we did to Ilmurad"

Police have again been pressuring members of Nurliev's church, asking them if his wife Maya is gathering them for worship services or meetings. "Church members have been summoned," Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "Police warned them: if we find out the church has been meeting, we'll do the same to you as we did to Ilmurad".

Police have also been trying to use church members against Nurliev and his wife as "provocateurs and spies", Protestants complained. They have also asked about other Protestant leaders.

The Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police is known to actively seek to recruit informers within all religious communities, as well as interrogating leaders (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

Under Turkmenistan's harsh Religion Law, all unregistered religious activity is illegal. Communities which function without registration face the constant threat of police raids, threats and punishments (see eg. F18News 28 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1534).

Increased information-gathering on students?

There is heightened government scrutiny of students within Turkmenistan and students from Turkmenistan studying abroad, following the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening uprisings for freedom and democracy. The authorities appear to be increasing their information-gathering on such students, including on their religious affiliation and practice, a blogger who uses the name Annasoltan noted on the Neweurasia.net website on 18 March and 1 April.

Through the use of tactics such as exit blacklists, harsh censorship, expulsions, and denials of entry visas the authorities have long sought to isolate active religious believers of all faiths from fellow-believers in other countries (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

One parent of a student studying abroad was asked only basic questions about his son's "relation to Islam", Annasoltan recounted, while another was subjected to much closer questioning on whether he attended mosque. While some questioning was done by phone, others were summoned to the MSS secret police "during which they had to hand write and sign guarantees that they will not go to certain places where Islam is being talked about, meet 'Muslims' (most likely a euphemism for Islamist) or read books about Islam".

Some students have been asked if they visit Muslim places of pilgrimage within Turkmenistan (such as the shrines of saints), what view they have of commemorating an individual three and seven days after their death, and their view of amulets to ward off the evil eye.

After extensive searches of student residences in Ashgabad in February, two students were reportedly expelled from their institute after recordings of verses of the Koran were discovered on their computers (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1551).

Religious censorship continues – except for Russian Orthodox?

The one religious community which has publicly claimed to have seen its situation improve is the Russian Orthodox Church, which has 12 parishes in Turkmenistan, particularly over religious literature. "For a long time, parishioners of Orthodox churches suffered from a visible information hunger because of the clear lack of church literature, as Turkmenistan had limitations on the import into the country of foreign printed materials," the head of the Patriarchal Deanery, Bishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov), declared in an interview to the pro-government journal Turkmenistan published on 15 April. "Now this problem has found its positive resolution." He said the Church has been given official permission to import religious literature and religious objects.

It is unclear whether this claim of a government promise will result in independently verifiable improvements, given the harsh censorship regime imposed on all publications and religious objects (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512).

The statement of Bishop Feofilakt, who presides over the Deanery as Bishop of the Russian Diocese of Pyatigorsk and Cherkessk, was supporting earlier claims of improvement made by Russian Patriarch Kirill in February (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1551).

Forum 18 notes that the Orthodox Church comments make no claims about the censorship regime imposed on followers of all other faiths and other Christian churches. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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