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## TURKMENISTAN: Pastor freed, other religious prisoners of conscience remain jailed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

*Nearly 18 months after his August 2010 arrest in Turkmenistan, Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev was among a group of about 230 prisoners freed under amnesty on 18 February from a labour camp. "He and the other prisoners were brought by special police train to Mary, and we rushed to the station to meet him," his wife Maya told Forum 18 News Service. "His release was so unexpected we forgot to get flowers. It is such a joy I can't tell you." He was given a four-year prison sentence in October 2010 on charges of swindling, which members of his congregation insist were fabricated to punish him for leading his unregistered church. Pastor Nurliev only learnt he would be amnestied on the previous evening. "I want to thank you and everyone else who supported me and helped my release", he told Forum 18. He will have to live under restrictions, reporting weekly to the police. It appears that none of the six Jehovah's Witness prisoners or the two Jehovah's Witnesses serving suspended sentences were included in the amnesty. Pastor Nurliev expressed concern over several Muslim prisoners in Seydi who might have been imprisoned for their faith.*

Nearly 18 months after his arrest, Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev was among a group of about 230 prisoners freed under amnesty on 18 February from the labour camp in the desert near Seydi in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region. "He and the other prisoners were brought by special police train to Mary and we rushed to the station to meet him," his wife Maya told Forum 18 from the town of Mary east of the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 20 February. "His release was so unexpected we forgot to get flowers. It is such a joy I can't tell you. Our sincere thanks and blessings to you and all who worked for his release." Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18 that he only learnt he would be amnestied on the previous evening. He will have to live under restrictions, reporting weekly to the police. It appears that none of the six Jehovah's Witness prisoners or the two Jehovah's Witnesses serving suspended sentences were included in the amnesty.

Pastor Nurliev expressed concern over several Muslim prisoners in Seydi who might have been imprisoned to punish them for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. He particularly highlighted the case of Musa (last name unknown), a Muslim from Ashgabad who seems to have been imprisoned for teaching the Koran to children. "He's a young man of about 25 – he leads prayers in the prison mosque," Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18. "It seems he was given a four-year sentence but I don't know on what charges. He was not freed."

Pastor Nurliev said the former Chief Imam of Mary Region, Muhammed-Rahim Muhammedov, remains in the camp. "He was imprisoned apparently for resisting the authorities, but I don't know the details." He said another imam arrested for illegally seizing land was among the prisoners freed under amnesty.

Regional Chief Imams – who are appointed by the state - routinely hold dual roles as heads of regional branches of the Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, which restricts freedom of religion or belief for all (see F18News 13 October 2009 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1361](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361)).

Pastor Nurliev said that the five Jehovah's Witness prisoners held in the Seydi camp – all conscientious objectors – were not freed under amnesty. Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 20 February that they too had no information that any of their prisoners had been amnestied.

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, went unanswered on 20 February. Also unanswered when Forum 18 called was the telephone of Pirnazar Hudainazarov, the Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms.

"Seventh prisoner amnesty – and finally it turned out well"

Pastor Nurliev was freed from Seydi labour camp together with the other amnestied prisoners at 2 pm on 18 February. His release was part of the presidentially-decreed amnesty to mark Flag Day on 19 February. "This was the seventh prisoner amnesty – and finally it turned out well. We found out from the internet that his name was on the list of those to be amnestied," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18. She said the information office at Mary station then told them that the special train bringing amnestied prisoners to Mary

was due to arrive at 8 pm on 18 February. She and other family members were reunited with him there.

"Church members have been coming to the house to celebrate my release with me," Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18 on 20 February. "I want to thank you and everyone else who supported me and helped my release."

The 46-year-old Nurliev, who is married with a daughter and two grandchildren, leads Light to the World Protestant Church in Mary. 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. They were never returned.

Arrested in August 2010, Pastor Nurliev was tried at Mary Town Court on 21 October 2010 under Criminal Code Article 228, Part 2 on charges of swindling. He was given a four-year labour camp term with "forcible medical treatment". His community insist the charges were fabricated to punish him for his religious activity. 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](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1525)).

No Bible, but no beatings

Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18 that conditions in labour camp were "not too bad". He said apart from the initial ten days in isolation cell in December 2010 after his arrival in the camp, he was not punished with further spells in the isolation cell. He said he had not been beaten.

Three other former religious prisoners of conscience – who all completed sentences at the Seydi camp in summer 2011 - revealed that solitary confinement and beatings were routine treatment within the camp (see F18News 25 January 2012 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1660](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660)).

Pastor Nurliev, who suffers from diabetes, said he was able to receive tablets and injections while in labour camp. "They passed on to me the medicines my wife brought."

However, he complained that throughout his 18-month imprisonment he was not allowed to have a copy of the Bible. "When I saw that the Muslim imams in Seydi were allowed to have copies of the Koran, I went to the head of the labour camp," Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18. "But he told me I couldn't have a Bible. He gave no reason."

Letters "showed me I was not forgotten"

Pastor Nurliev said he was also not given the many letters, cards and photographs he was sent from around the world. "I was able to see letters and cards from Canada, Britain and elsewhere that had come in for me," he told Forum 18. "But although I could have a quick look at some of them, they wouldn't give them to me." He thanked those who had written to him in labour camp. "They showed me I was not forgotten."

Restrictions

Pastor Nurliev was given back his identity documents after his release. However, he will have to report to the police every Saturday evening. He did not know if there will be any other conditions.

His certificate of study which he had obtained after completing a theological course in Ukraine and his certificate of ordination as a pastor, which also took place in Ukraine, were confiscated in August 2010 at the time of his arrest. They have not been returned. Officials told him since his release that if he wants them back he will have to apply to the court in Mary.

It remains unclear if Pastor Nurliev remains on the exit blacklist which he has been on since at least 2007. "I'll have to go to Ashgabad to ask the Migration Service," he told Forum 18. "I intend to do so."

Registration system designed to ensure close government control

Pastor Nurliev's church is among the many religious communities of a variety of faiths which have been refused registration. The authorities insist – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – that only state-registered religious communities are allowed to function.

"We first applied for registration in February 2007 and after they told us to amend the application, we resubmitted it in January 2010," Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18 (see F18News 1 February 2010 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1401](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1401)). "But the documents are still there in Ashgabad and we've had no response".

The Turkmen government told the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in January 2011 (CERD/C/TKM/6-7) that only 127 religious communities had been granted state registration. It said 98 of them were Sunni Muslim, 5 Shia Muslim, 13 Russian Orthodox and 11 of other faiths (including one Catholic, one Hare Krishna, one Baha'i, one Baptist, one

Pentecostal, one Greater Grace, one Seventh-day Adventist and one New Apostolic community). The CERD is due to review Turkmenistan's record in Geneva on 23 and 24 February.

While Forum 18 notes that the numbers the government gives for non-Muslim communities appear to reflect the current situation, the numbers of registered Muslim communities – particularly the number of claimed registered Shia Muslim communities – cannot be independently verified.

Religious communities which the government does not wish to register are generally told that their applications contain "grammatical mistakes" or other "errors". One religious community was reportedly told that the reason for the rejection was that its leader is blind, while another was rejected because its leader is female. The registration system for acquiring legal status seems designed to ensure close government control (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1512](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1512)).

#### Religious prisoners of conscience

In addition to the Muslim possible religious prisoners of conscience in Seydi, all six current known religious prisoners of conscience are Jehovah's Witnesses. Five of them – all being held in the Seydi labour camp – have been imprisoned for refusing compulsory military service under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. They are: Ahmet Hudybergenov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, September 2010; Sunet Japbarov, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, December 2010; Matkarim Aminov, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, December 2010; Dovran Matyakubov, 18 months, Boldumsaz Court, December 2010; and Mahmud Hudybergenov, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, August 2011 (see F18News 16 February 2012 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1668](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1668)).

The sixth Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience is Ashgabad resident Vladimir Nuryllayev. Arrested in November 2011, several weeks after police seized his religious literature and his computer, he was accused of "spreading pornography" under Criminal Code Article 164, Part 2. He was tried on 18 January 2012 at Ashgabad's Azatlyk District Court, found guilty and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. His appeal was rejected at a 10-minute hearing at Ashgabad City Court on 14 February. Nuryllayev's fellow Jehovah's Witnesses insist he is innocent of the accusations, which they say were brought to punish him for his religious affiliation (see F18News 16 February 2012 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1668](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1668)).

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

Two Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are serving suspended sentences. At what one fellow Jehovah's Witness described to Forum 18 as a "show trial", Akmurad Nurjanov was given a one-year suspended prison sentence on 13 February at Ashgabad's Azatlyk District Court (see F18News 16 February 2012 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1668](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1668)).

Also believed to be still serving a suspended sentence is Denis Petrenko, given a two year suspended sentence in Ashgabad in April 2010. He was required to live at home under some restrictions, including reporting regularly to the authorities (see F18News 29 April 2011 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1566](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566)).

An unverified report indicates that a Muslim may have been imprisoned in 2011 on charges of "spreading pornography" for distributing religious discs. The same charge was used against Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Nuryllayev, apparently because the police found religious literature in a cupboard in his flat, and who his community firmly insist is innocent of the charge (see F18News 25 January 2012 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1660](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660)). (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](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](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](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](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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