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TURKMENISTAN: Four fines for Bibles, prisoner transferred

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

After the local police officer in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad found Bibles in the possessions of three guests at a local Protestant's home, all four were taken to the government's Council for Religious Affairs for questioning, then held for an hour in an overcrowded detention cell, before being taken to court, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. Although the judge refused to try them without proper documentation, they were brought back and fined by the same judge a week later for "violation of the law on religious organisations". Meanwhile, in the wake of his four year prison sentence handed down in February, Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Nuryllayev has been transferred to the isolated desert prison of Ovadan-Depe, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. But he is not in the high-security unit but the manual labour section, mainly working in the kitchens. His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses – who insist he has been punished because of his faith - hope he will be included in the amnesty likely to be called for Constitution Day on 18 May.

Four Protestants were fined in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] in late February after a local police officer found Bibles among their possessions when they searched a private home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Meanwhile, Vladimir Nuryllayev, an Ashgabad-based Jehovah's Witness serving a four-year sentence on charges his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses insist were fabricated to punish him for his faith, has been transferred to the labour camp in Ovadan-Depe in the Karakum desert, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The man who on 27 March answered the phone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, refused to identify himself. As soon as Forum 18 introduced itself he put down the phone.

Few answers

Turkmenistan's restrictions on exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief were among topics raised when the country's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was examined by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee in New York on 15 and 16 March. The Turkmen delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Vepa Hadjiyev.

Hadjiyev dismissed the Committee's concerns on restrictions on religious activity. He denied that restrictions exist on imports of religious literature, or wearing religious clothes. The Turkmen delegation appears to have given evasive answers or ignored other questions from the Committee on restrictions on unregistered religious worship, denial of state registration and restrictions on religious education, particularly of children.

The Turkmen delegation was specifically asked about Jehovah's Witness prisoners, including the imprisoned conscientious objectors held in the labour camp in Seydi in the eastern Lebap Region (see F18News 20 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1669).

"On the Jehovah's Witness cases, he said the detainees were not being kept in isolation," the UN summary of the 16 March session reported Hadjiyev as telling the Committee. "He would look into the matter and then provide the information to the Committee. He said the Jehovah's Witness 'cult' had beliefs that were opposed to the views and values of Turkmenistan."

Confiscation, questioning

Trouble for the four Protestants began when the local police officer telephoned to say he was coming to check the home of a local Protestant in Ashgabad. Three Protestants from outside the capital were staying with the local Protestant. "You can't refuse when the local police officer asks to check your home," one Ashgabad resident familiar with the case told Forum 18. They asked that the four not be identified to protect them from further harassment.

During his 20 February visit, the police officer found one Bible in each of the visitors' bags. The Bibles were confiscated, together with at least one mobile phone, and all four Protestants were taken to the Gengesh. There they were questioned about their religious activity. The Gengesh official reportedly shouted at them, accusing them of having brought "illegal" religious literature into Turkmenistan. However, the official had a copy of the same Bible in his office.

The Gengesh official then threatened to have drugs planted on the four. "Then you'll be in on another charge," he warned them.

The four Protestants were then taken to a detention facility, where they were put in a cell designed for about four detainees but which contained 17, with no room to sit down. After an hour they were brought out to be taken to a judge. However, she refused to hear a case against the four, insisting that no trial could take place as police had presented no proof of wrongdoing and no documentation.

Despite complaining that the four had created undue work for them, police were obliged to let the four Protestants go. But officers told them they were not allowed to leave Ashgabad while the investigation against them continued.

Trial, fines

The four Protestants were summoned to a local Ashgabad court on 27 February, for a trial presided over by the same judge. All four were found guilty of violating Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("violation of the law on religious organisations"). The judge fined each of them 357 Manats (714 Norwegian Kroner, 94 Euros or 125 US Dollars).

Article 205 specifies fines of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage for refusing to register a religious community or participating in an unregistered religious community. Fines can be doubled for repeat offenders (see Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

"Perhaps there had been pressure on the judge to force her to change her stance," an Ashgabad resident familiar with the case told Forum 18.

The four Protestants each reluctantly paid the fines, despite believing that they had done nothing wrong. Had they refused to do so, they could have faced up to 15 days in prison.

Forum 18 is not aware that the confiscated Bibles have been returned to them.

Prisoner transferred

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness prisoner Nuryllayev was transferred on 26 February from the pre-trial detention facility at Yashlyk to Ovadan-Depe prison, an isolated top-security prison in the desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Although a closed section of the prison houses political prisoners serving harsh sentences, Nuryllayev was among 20 general regime prisoners assigned to a different section there to conduct manual labour, including in the kitchens.

Nuryllayev's fellow Jehovah's Witnesses are more optimistic now he has been sent to Ovadan-Depe's manual labour section. They believe each batch of twenty prisoners is more likely to be freed from prison under an amnesty than those sent to serve sentences in other labour camps. While ten of Nuryllayev's cell-mates at Yashlyk were freed in a prisoner amnesty in February 2012, he was among three who were not. His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses hope he will be included in the amnesty likely to be called for Constitution Day on 18 May.

"Conditions for those in the manual labour section are not too bad," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "No-one is insulting or abusing Vladimir. He now looks a lot better than when he was in Yashlyk. Now he has hope."

Nuryllayev is allowed one visit each 30 days, with parcels allowed once a week. Religious literature is not allowed in parcels, which generally consist of food. Both handing in the parcel and arriving to be transported to the prison for the visit takes place in the town of Annau near Ashgabad.

Supreme Court appeal?

Nuryllayev was arrested in November 2011, several weeks after police seized his religious literature and computer. He was accused of "spreading pornography" which is banned 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 (see F18News 20 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1669).

Nuryllayev is intending to lodge a further appeal to Turkmenistan's Supreme Court, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Mother suffers

Nuryllayev's fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that his mother Lyubov – who marked her 74th birthday on 24 March – misses her son. Lyubov Nuryllayeva has been bed-ridden for some years after she was hit by a car. Nuryllayev was the main family

member looking after her, as he was generally able to come home at some point during each working day to feed and care for her.

Because of her condition, family members have reportedly not told her that her son is in prison, merely telling her that he is working in another town.

Restrictions on freed prisoner

Former religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev has to report each Saturday to the local police station in his home town of Mary, east of Ashgabad, Protestants told Forum 18. On the first two Saturdays after his February release, men who identified themselves only as "police leaders" warned him not to resume gathering members of his Light to the World Protestant Church for worship. "They also telephone to check on this," one Protestant told Forum 18.

Nurliev had been serving a four-year prison sentence imposed in October 2010 on charges his church members insisted had been fabricated to punish him for leading his unregistered congregation. However, he was freed under amnesty in February 2012 (see F18News 20 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1669).

After his release, Pastor Nurliev visited Mary Town Court to request the return of his theology diploma he gained in Ukraine and his ordination certificate. Both were confiscated in August 2010 at the time of his arrest and officials told him he would have to seek their return from the court where he was sentenced. However, court officials told him he would have to request their return in writing, Protestants told Forum 18. He is now preparing such a request.

Pastor Nurliev – who suffers from diabetes – has also been in hospital trying to restore his health, Protestants also told Forum 18. He is planning to visit the Migration Service in Ashgabad to find out whether he is still on the exit ban list which the authorities maintain for those they do not like. He was placed on the list without explanation in 2007 (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403). (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=1676.

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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