

20 December 2013

TURKMENISTAN: New prisoner of conscience, prisoners "set up" not to be amnestied

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Suhrab Rahmanberdiyev has become the 11th known prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief in Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service notes. He became the ninth known jailed conscientious objector to military service when he was given an 18-month prison term on 18 November. The 18 year old was also beaten while in custody, and relatives did not know that the trial was taking place and so were unable to attend. Known freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience are nine Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors and a Protestant and a Jehovah's Witness jailed for other freedom of religion or belief-related reasons. At least two of the prisoners of conscience - Zafar Abdullaev and Atamurat Suvkhanov – were obstructed from being included in a December prisoner amnesty. A labour camp official told Abdullaev he had to admit to violating prison regulations so as not to be on the amnesty list. "The official threatened that if Zafar didn't do this himself, he would find a way to set this up", Forum 18 was told. Officials have refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Suhrab Rahmanberdiyev has become the 11th known prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief in Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service notes. He became the ninth known jailed conscientious objector to military service when he was given an 18-month prison term on 18 November, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The 18 year old was also beaten while in custody, his mother said, after refusing to declare himself a Muslim.

Meanwhile, police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police in the northern city of Dashoguz have raided and threatened members of the local state-registered Pentecostal Light of the East Church. Two homes of church members were raided and religious literature including personal Bibles were seized. Officials stated that "singing about God here is banned" and threatened to ban a Pentecostal Church (see F18News 20 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1911).

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 18 and 19 December. The Gengesh's main role is restricting people's exercise of freedom of religion or belief (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676). Today (20 December) the man who answered Nursakhatov's telephone put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Arrested, beaten

Rahmanberdiyev – who was born in the town of Seydi in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan - is preparing for baptism as a Jehovah's Witness. He was called up for compulsory military service in the autumn. In early November he was arrested for refusing to be conscripted on grounds of his religious beliefs. During pre-trial detention, his relatives were not allowed to see him, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. It was during this period that he was known to have been beaten.

Rahmanberdiyev's trial took place on 18 November, at which he was given the 18-month prison term. He was punished under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676). Relatives did not know that the trial was taking place and were thus unable to attend.

Nine known conscientious objector prisoners

The current known imprisoned conscientious objectors – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses - are: Zafar Abdullaev, aged 26, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, March 2012; Navruz Nasyrlyayev, aged 22, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, May 2012; Dovran Matyakubov, aged 21, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, December 2012; Yadgarbek Sharipov, aged 21, one year, Dashoguz Court, December 2012; Matkarim Aminov, aged 22, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, January 2013; Arslan Dovletov, aged 21, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, January 2013; Atamurat Suvkhanov, aged 27, one year, Dashoguz Court, March 2013; Amirlan Tolkachev, aged 21, 18 months, Turkmenabad Court, July 2013; and Suhrab Rahmanberdiyev, aged 18, 18 months, November 2013.

Abdullayev, Sharipov, Dovletov, Suvkhanov and Tolkachev are in the general regime section of the labour camp in the desert near Seydi in Lebap Region. Nasyrlayev, Matyakubov and Aminov are in the strict regime section of the same camp. The address of the general regime Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan

746222 Lebap vilayet

Seydi

uchr. LB-K/12

The strict regime camp has the same address, but with the code:

uchr. LB-K/11

Rahmanberdiyev's place of imprisonment remains unknown.

The last known conscientious objector prisoner of conscience before Rahmanberdiyev was 20-year old Amirlan Tolkachev, who was given an 18-month prison term in Turkmenabad on 10 July (see F18News 29 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1869).

Seven of the nine current conscientious objector prisoners, as well as a number of former prisoners have lodged applications to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee protesting against their imprisonment and maltreatment. The complaints note that especially in the Seydi Labour Camp, where most of the conscientious objector prisoners are held, they have regularly been subjected to spells in the punishment cell and some have been brutally beaten. Jehovah's Witnesses regard a subsequent raid on the family home of one of the applicants and a second prison sentence on another as state reprisals for lodging the application (see F18News 29 August 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1869).

No freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience amnestied

Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov signed a prisoner amnesty on 6 December to mark Neutrality Day, 12 December, the state media reported. A total of 630 prisoners were said to be due to be freed under the amnesty and a commission under State Security Minister Yaylym Berdiyev was set up to oversee the amnesty.

However, none of the 11 known prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief – including the nine imprisoned conscientious objectors - were included in the amnesty.

In at least two cases officials appear to have deliberately obstructed their inclusion. Before the amnesty labour camp authorities asked Zafar Abdullaev and Atamurat Suvkhanov which of their relatives were Jehovah's Witnesses.

Shortly before the amnesty, a labour camp official summoned Abdullaev and told him he had to admit to violating prison regulations himself so as not to end up on the list of those to be amnestied. "The official threatened that if Zafar didn't do this himself, he would find a way to set this up," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "Zafar agreed and wrote that he had been late for a regular inspection."

Also not amnestied was another imprisoned Jehovah's Witness, Aibek Salayev, convicted in Dashoguz in April 2012 on apparently framed charges of "distributing pornography" and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. Jehovah's Witnesses insist the charges were fabricated to punish him for his faith. He is also being held in Seydi Labour Camp (see F18News 17 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1733).

Nor was imprisoned Protestant Umid Gojayev amnestied. He was arrested in Dashoguz in April 2012 and sentenced the following month to four years' imprisonment on charges of hooliganism. His arrest followed an argument with neighbours, and local Protestants insist the criminal charges were brought disproportionately because of his religious beliefs (see F18News 25 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1817).

The latest conscientious objector prisoner freed was Juma Nazarov, who was released on 29 August. He had been given an 18-month prison term by Ashgabad Court in July 2012 (see F18News 17 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1733). (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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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