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TURKMENISTAN: President falsely claims no religious prisoners

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Under pressure from a draft UN resolution sponsored by the EU and US, the Turkmen president, Saparmurat Niyazov, has defended his record with the claim that Turkmenistan has never had religious prisoners of conscience and cooperates fully with international human rights bodies. However, Forum 18 News Service knows of Jehovah's Witness prisoners and an imam in internal exile. Also imprisoned for his faith was Baptist Shagildy Atakov. Turkmenistan has both consistently failed to cooperate with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and other UN human rights agencies and also has this month introduced a harsh new religion law outlawing all unregistered religious activity, which defies international human rights agreements it has signed.

Turkmenistan's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, has claimed - wrongly - that the country has never imprisoned anyone on religious grounds and that it cooperates fully with international bodies on human rights. Forum 18 News Service is aware of six current Jehovah's Witness prisoners - five sentenced for refusing military service on grounds of religious conscience and one on fraud charges believed to have been trumped up - as well as one imam in internal exile. Turkmenistan has also consistently failed to cooperate with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and other UN human rights agencies.

The latest government moves appear to be a response to a draft UN resolution sponsored by the European Union and the United States (A/C.3/58/L.67) and introduced on 21 November expressing "grave concern about the continuing and serious human rights violations occurring in Turkmenistan". It called on the country to implement the April 2003 UN human rights commission resolution on Turkmenistan (which urged an immediate improvement in the human rights situation) and to cooperate fully with the UN human rights agencies.

President Niyazov's claims - reported on Turkmenistan's first television channel on 20 November - came in messages to the European Union and the European Commission declaring that the country is ready to cooperate closely on human rights and democracy with international and European institutions, including the UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

"There has not been a single case in Turkmenistan of an arrest or the conviction of a person on a political or religious pretext, for the expression of a belief," the television report claimed, quoting the presidential messages. Turkmenistan has consistently invited experts from UN human rights bodies to visit the country and cooperate in drawing up national reports on the human rights situation, the report added.

Three Jehovah's Witness young men were sentenced in May to one and a half years' imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience (Turkmenistan has no provision for alternative service). One young man was sentenced in July on the same charges to one and a half years' imprisonment (See F18News 2 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151).

An official of the Jehovah's Witness headquarters in the Russian city of St Petersburg told Forum 18 on 24 November that they were not releasing the names or home towns of the four prisoners for fear of making their situation worse. The official said at least one Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector (whom they did not identify) has been subjected to homosexual rape in prison in the past few years and all others have been threatened with the same fate.

Another of their imprisoned conscientious objectors, Nikolai Shelekhov, is nearing the end of his second sentence. Sentenced in July 2002 to one and a half years in prison, Shelekhov is currently being held in a labour camp in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou (Chärjou)).

The religious prisoner serving the longest prison term is Jehovah's Witness Kurban Zakirov, sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in 2000 and believed to be held in a labour camp in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (Türkmenbashy) (formerly Krasnovodsk).

Forum 18 learnt in late October that 75-year-old imam Hoja Ahmed Orazklychev, deported from the capital Ashgabat (Ashgabat) in March 2000 after a mosque where he preached was demolished by the authorities, remains in internal exile in a remote village in the

Tedjen district of southern Turkmenistan close to the Iranian border.

A lawyer serving a four year sentence - apparently imposed in retaliation for helping her fellow Jehovah's Witnesses - was freed early from the women's labour camp in Tashauz in the north of the country on 20 September. Oguljan Jumanazarova began a four year sentence in July 2001 and had therefore not been due for release until July 2005. She had worked for a public attorneys' association in the town of Seydi close to Turkmenistan's north-eastern border with Uzbekistan and had begun to face pressure after helping fellow-believers with their legal problems.

Among other recent religious prisoners was Baptist Shageldy Atakov, arrested in Turkmenbashi in December 1998 in reprisal for his activities with his church and sentenced to four year's imprisonment on fabricated charges of swindling and forging documents. After widespread international pressure, including meetings between President Niyazov and foreign diplomats, he was freed early from his sentence in January 2002. Atakov himself was twice taken to Muhammed Nazarov, the then-head of the secret police who has since been imprisoned by President Niyazov, as negotiations over his release were underway.

Despite President Niyazov's claims, Turkmenistan has failed to cooperate with UN human rights bodies, including with the UN Human Rights Commission's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Abdelfattah Amor. In his latest report to the UN General Assembly (A/58/296), presented on 19 August 2003, the special rapporteur pointed out that he had written three letters to the Turkmen government over the previous year inquiring about the deportation of two Baptist families, a raid on a Baptist service in Balkanabad last March and a raid on a Hare Krishna meeting in Ashgabad in May.

The special rapporteur regretted that he had received no response to these inquiries. "The Special Rapporteur is concerned by the recent developments in government policy regarding respect for freedom of religion and belief and, noting that he has already sent three communications during the period covered by this report, hopes to receive a response from the Government in the near future."

It is believed that the Turkmen government has still not responded to these inquiries. Nor has the Turkmen government issued an invitation for Professor Amor to visit the country to investigate the religious freedom situation at first hand. In its April resolution, the UN human rights commission had called on Turkmenistan to invite all the UN special rapporteurs, including the rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, to visit.

Turkmenistan has also this month (November 2003) introduced the harshest law on religion in the former Soviet Union outlawing all unregistered religious activity, which defies human rights agreements it has signed. (See F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180)

More background is available in the October 2003 Forum 18 religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

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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