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TURKMENISTAN: Eleven-year wait on haj pilgrimage list?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan's government sought and received approval from the Saudi Arabian authorities for just 650 Muslims to travel on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca in October, a Saudi consular official told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Ashgabad. Although an increase on the usual 188 in the state-sponsored group, this is just under a seventh of the haj quota allocated by the Saudi authorities. "Turkmenistan is one of the governments not doing all it can to help pilgrims," the Saudi official noted. "We're trying to help them." Muslims in one of the country's six administrative divisions have to wait up to eleven years to reach the top of the haj waiting list, an official of Balkan Region Religious Affairs office told Forum 18. He said that 21 pilgrims from his Region are due to be selected soon to travel this year, the same number as in 2013. He claimed that Shia Muslims are not obstructed from joining the haj. The Turkmen government has never explained why it severely restricts haj numbers.

Muslims in Balkan Region of western Turkmenistan have to wait on average between eight and eleven years to reach the top of the waiting list to join the state-organised haj pilgrimage to the Muslim holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, an official of the regional Religious Affairs office told Forum 18 News Service from Balkanabad on 21 August. Turkmenistan's government is allowing just under a seventh of the haj quota allocated by the Saudi authorities to travel this October to Mecca. "Turkmenistan is one of the governments not doing all it can to help pilgrims," a Saudi consular official told Forum 18 from Ashgabad [Ashgabat].

Azad (who did not give his last name), the Balkan Region Religious Affairs official, said 21 pilgrims from the Region will be joining this year's haj in early October, exactly the same number as last year. He said the 21 successful applicants would be chosen within the next week. He declined to say how many names are on the Regional waiting list.

Balkan Region is one of six administrative divisions of the country (five Regions and the capital Ashgabad). State Religious Affairs offices in other Regions either refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 or else did not answer their phones when Forum 18 called.

The man who on 20 August answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, repeatedly put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Azad also noted that although "the state helps" with the costs, each pilgrim will be required to pay 5,000 Manats (11,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,300 Euros or 1,800 US Dollars) through the bank to cover their cost.

The haj pilgrimage - expected this year to fall between 2 and 7 October - is an obligation for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford it at least once in their lifetime. The government has severely restricted its citizens' participation in the past two decades. It has never explained why it does so (see below).

Tight state control

All religious communities in Turkmenistan face tight government restrictions, with frequent punishments for those who exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission. Bibi Rahmanova, a Jehovah's Witness from the northern city of Dashoguz, was given a four-year prison term on 18 August on charges her community insist were fabricated to punish her for her faith. Her husband too is being investigated on criminal charges (see F18News 20 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1987).

However, Islam is under even tighter state control than other faiths. The government controls all appointments of imams at national and regional level, transferring and removing imams as it sees fit with no apparent consultation with Muslim communities (see F18News 25 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1805).

Imams – both at national and regional level – also have a dual role as state Religious Affairs officials. This means that leaders appointed to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of the Islamic community also have a state-appointed role to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of non-Muslim religious communities (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

One seventh of country's quota

Turkmenistan's government is preparing for 650 of its citizens to travel in the government-organised pilgrimage in October, a Saudi consular official in the embassy in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 20 August. Although a more than three-fold increase on recent years, this remains just less than one seventh of the quota of pilgrims for Turkmenistan, which the Saudi official put at 4,600.

By contrast, the republic of Ingushetia in Russia's North Caucasus – with a population of about 450,000 - has this year received a quota of 1,400 pilgrims. This is more than double the number of pilgrims than from Turkmenistan for a population less than one tenth of the size.

Azad of the Balkan Region Religious Affairs office said he did not know the total number of haj pilgrims who will be travelling from Turkmenistan this October.

Forum 18 can find no public announcements from Turkmen government agencies or the state media as to the number of haj pilgrims the government will allow to travel this year. In previous years, such public announcements have usually come only in the weeks before the pilgrims set off on the government-sponsored aeroplane.

Only state-organised pilgrimage

For the 2014 haj, the Turkmen authorities asked for and received 650 haj visas, the Saudi consular official told Forum 18. The official said the Turkmen authorities are allowing pilgrims only from the state-organised party, which is coordinated by the Gengesh.

In most previous years, Turkmenistan has limited the number of pilgrims allowed to travel on the haj to one aircraft-full (usually 188 pilgrims, including state officials conducting surveillance on the other pilgrims). In 2009, the government allowed no haj pilgrims to travel at all, citing alleged health concerns (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

The Saudi consular official attributed the rise from 188 to 650 to the surge in demand in 2013. "Many people came to our embassy last year requesting haj visas outside the state-organised group," the official told Forum 18. "We had to help them." The official said a total of 1,277 visas were issued for the October 2013 haj, including the 188 from the state-organised group. "The rest travelled independently, paying for themselves."

The official confirmed that this was the first time that the Turkmen authorities had allowed any haj pilgrims not in the state-organised group to make the pilgrimage.

Who chooses pilgrims?

Azad of the Balkan Region Religious Affairs office insisted to Forum 18 that Muslims who want to go on the haj need to write an application to the Regional imam. "The Regional imam draws up the list of pilgrims from the Region," he told Forum 18. "I'm his assistant." He said only the Muftiate in Ashgabad needs to approve the applications of those eventually chosen. He made no mention of any role by the Gengesh, the police or the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police.

However, local people have repeatedly said otherwise. Would-be pilgrims have to gain "recommendations" from the religious leadership in their place of residence. "All the names of candidates then go to the Gengesh and there they draw up the final lists," one Ashgabad resident explained to Forum 18 in 2012 (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

An Ashgabad-based source told Forum 18 in 2008 that the Cabinet of Ministers approves the list of those authorised to travel on the haj. The source said would-be pilgrims have their documents processed through the local religious affairs official in the hyakimlik (administration) where they live, though all the decisions on who may or may not travel are taken in Ashgabad. The MSS secret police is also involved (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219).

State control of pilgrimage

Official pronouncements have repeatedly made clear that the government regards it as its duty to control all aspects of the haj pilgrimage. An adulatory message to President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov – published by the state news agency on 10 January 2014 - noted that "with your lofty blessing and with your support a representative group of Turkmen pilgrims undertook the haj to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to holy Mecca". The message was signed by the three leading officials of the Gengesh – the Chair Imam Charygeldi Seryaev, Deputy Chair and Chief Mufti Mekan Akyev and Deputy Chair Nursakhatov.

Just before the pilgrims left in October 2013, President Berdymukhamedov signed an "instruction" authorising them to do so, state media noted on 27 September 2013. He also ordered that an airliner be provided to take them to and from Saudi Arabia at the

airline's expense. The instruction was prepared by Deputy Chair of the Cabinet of Ministers, Sapardurdy Toylyyev, who was described as being in charge of this issue.

Forum 18 has repeatedly been told that MSS secret police officers go as part of the state-sponsored pilgrimage group. However, officials have never acknowledged this.

Turkmenistan "not doing all it can to help pilgrims"

The Saudi consular official noted that even the 1,277 pilgrims in 2013 or the 650 pilgrims in 2014 the Turkmen government has allowed is far below the quota the Saudi government allocates to Turkmenistan. "The ratio is a thousand pilgrims for every one million inhabitants," the official explained to Forum 18. "So if Turkmenistan's population is 4,600,000, its quota is 4,600."

The official made clear that the restrictions on numbers were on the Turkmen, not the Saudi side. "Turkmenistan is one of the governments not doing all it can to help pilgrims," the official told Forum 18, "unlike the governments for example of Turkey, Indonesia or Malaysia. We're trying to help them."

Because no official at the Gengesh was willing to talk to Forum 18, it was unable to find out why – even if the number of state-organised pilgrims has increased this year – the government limits the numbers of haj pilgrims.

Can Shia Muslims be pilgrims?

For some years, complaints have been heard from the minority Shia Muslim community – mainly found among the Azeri and Iranian minorities in western Turkmenistan – that it is all but impossible for them to get on the approved list of haj pilgrims.

Azad of Balkan Region Religious Affairs office adamantly rejected this. "Shia Muslims can go also," he claimed. "There is no difference." He said that Balkan Region has one Shia Mosque, in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi.

In about 2005, the Mosque's imam – an Azerbaijani citizen – was forced to leave Turkmenistan after serving the Mosque community for more than a decade (see F18News 5 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1167). (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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