FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

18 February 2015

TURKMENISTAN: Two amnestied prisoners, conscientious objector in hospital, beaten "Wahhabis"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Umid Gojayev, imprisoned on charges of hooliganism which local Protestants insist were brought disproportionately because of his religious beliefs, and Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Narkuliyev were freed yesterday (17 February), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Both were released under amnesty from the same labour camp in Seydi in eastern Turkmenistan. "Narkuliyev's release means that there are no longer any Jehovah's Witnesses convicted and imprisoned in Turkmenistan as conscientious objectors," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. However, Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Soyunmurat Korov is being held "against his will" in military hospital in Ashgabad. Meanwhile, five Muslim men imprisoned on charges of religious extremism, were severely beaten on arrival in Seydi strict regime labour camp in early February. One suffered a broken hand, another a broken rib and damage to his lung. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if they were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or for committing crimes.

Two religious prisoners were freed under amnesty from the general regime labour camp in Seydi in eastern Turkmenistan yesterday (17 February), their fellow believers told Forum 18 News Service. Released were Umid Gojayev, a 32-year-old Protestant imprisoned on charges of hooliganism, and 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Narkuliyev.

After his release, Gojayev boarded a train for the two-day journey via the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] to return to his wife and three young children in the northern city of Dashoguz, Protestants in Turkmenistan told Forum 18. Once home, he will have to report to his local police officer every Saturday. Narkuliyev has a journey of just 75 kms (50 miles) to his home in Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjew).

Gojayev and Narkuliyev were freed under a prisoner amnesty to mark Flag Day on 19 February. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov signed a decree initiating the amnesty on 16 February, the government website noted the same day.

"Narkuliyev's release means that there are no longer any Jehovah's Witnesses convicted and imprisoned in Turkmenistan as conscientious objectors," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 18 February. "This is the first time for many years and is obviously a very welcome development."

Six of the eight Jehovah's Witness prisoners freed under amnesty in October 2014 were conscientious objectors (see F18News 28 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2009).

Meanwhile, five Muslim men imprisoned on charges of religious extremism, who arrived in Seydi strict regime labour camp in early February, were severely beaten on arrival. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if they – and a group of about ten Muslim men transferred from that labour camp to the high-security prison in Ovadan-Depe in December 2014 – are prisoners of conscience (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach the leadership of Seydi strict regime labour camp or the high-security prison in Ovadan-Depe as no telephone numbers for them are made public.

These developments come as police, state religious affairs officials and the courts continue to punish individuals and communities for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, with raids, threats and fines (see F18News 12 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2047).

Conscientious objector in military hospital

Soyunmurat Korov became the second known Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience (in addition to Narkuliyev) when he was arrested on 18 November 2014. He refused the compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience.

However, Korov was then transferred to the military hospital in Bekrewe on the western edge of Ashgabad as he was suffering from

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015

an apparent medical complaint. "Korov is being kept for medical observation against his will by order of the investigator and/or prosecutor," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "We are obviously still very concerned about him and hope that the prosecutor and/or investigator will now take steps to allow him to leave the hospital and return home."

It remains unclear if Korov will be allowed to return home or if he will face trial for refusing military service as so many other young male Jehovah's Witnesses have done over many years (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Freed prisoners

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Narkuliyev was sentenced by a Turkmenabad court to two years' imprisonment in September 2014 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. Soon after his sentencing, Narkuliyev was transferred to the general regime section of the Seydi Labour Camp in eastern Lebap Region (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Narkuliyev's fellow Jehovah's Witnesses had hoped he would be freed under amnesty in October 2014, together with the other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. However, Narkuliyev's name appears to have been left off the list and he was not freed (see F18News 28 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2009).

Gojayev, the Protestant from Dashoguz, was also held in the same camp. Arrested in April 2012, he was serving a four year prison term imposed by a Dashoguz court in May 2012. His arrest followed an argument with neighbours, and local Protestants insist the criminal charges were brought disproportionately because of his religious beliefs (see F18News 21 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1940).

"Wahhabi" prisoners beaten

In the beginning of February, five prisoners convicted of "Wahhabism" were brought into the strict-regime labour camp in Seydi. From 5 to 7 February, prison guards subjected them to brutal beatings, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. One man suffered a broken hand, while another suffered a broken rib and damage to his lung.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the five men were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief or for committing crimes. The term "Wahhabi" is widely used in Central Asia for any devout Muslim, regardless of whether they do or do not commit or espouse violence.

The address of the strict regime Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan

746222 Lebap vilayet

Seydi

uchr. LB-K/11

Prison violence

In 2011 the UN Committee against Torture found that, in Turkmenistan, "persons deprived of their liberty are tortured, ill-treated and threatened by public officers, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, to extract confessions and as an additional punishment after the confession" (UN reference CAT/C/TKM/CO/1 http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ef0540f2.html).

Yet violence against prisoners in Turkmenistan continues widely, human rights defenders and exiled Turkmen journalists note. Following his release from labour camp in Bairamali in July 2014 and return to Russia, Stanislav Romashchenko (who had been imprisoned for attempted murder) recounted many cases when prison guards and riot police beat him and fellow prisoners, in a film by the exile Alternative Turkmenistan News.

Fifteen current and former conscientious objector prisoners lodged applications to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee between September 2012 and August 2013 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 were regularly subjected to spells in the punishment cell and some were brutally beaten (see F18News 21 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1940).

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015

These complaints are still pending with the UN Human Rights Committee, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The family home in Dashoguz of the lead complainant in one Jehovah's Witness UN complaint was raided by police in January 2013, seven weeks after the UN had sought information from the Turkmen government about the circumstances of the complaint. Individuals were beaten, threatened with rape and fined (see F18News 14 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1801).

"Wahhabi" prisoners transferred back to Ovadan-Depe

The Turkmen authorities have imprisoned many "Wahhabis" in recent years, many of whom are held in a closed section of the isolated top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe in the Karakum desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Again, Forum 18 has been unable to find out if these "Wahhabis" were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief or for committing crimes.

About 10 Muslim prisoners were transferred in December 2014 from the strict-regime labour camp in Seydi back to Ovadan-Depe prison, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. The men had already served at least six years' imprisonment (two three-year terms) in Ovadan-Depe until their transfer to Seydi in 2013.

As soon as they arrived in Seydi, they were sent to the punishment cells, where they were held for about a year and a half before their December 2014 transfer back to Ovadan-Depe. For some of the time they were all held together in one punishment cell, at other times the group was divided between two punishment cells.

The group's leader, Ashirali (last name unknown), who is from Ashgabad, was the first to be arrested, in 2008. Two of the others are named Begench and Attou or Ata (last names unknown). The names of the rest are unknown.

The group of Muslims – described as "Wahhabis" – were apparently punished after bullets were planted on them or for resisting an official. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if they are prisoners of conscience punished solely for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

About 120 men accused of being "Wahhabis" were being held in the seventh and eighth blocks at Ovadan-Depe in 2014, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 24 August 2014. Like political prisoners held in the desert prison, "Wahhabis" are banned from receiving parcels or visits from relatives, it added. (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.

Follow us on Twitter @Forum_18 (http://twitter.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (http://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService)

All Forum 18 text may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015