

4 December 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Continuing concern at criminalisation of religious belief and practice

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Reliable sources have told Forum 18 News Service that officials don't yet know how harshly to implement Turkmenistan's new religion law, which breaches international human rights agreements the country has signed. It is believed that instructions may be given for harsh implementation. International pressure on Turkmenistan is growing the UN human rights committee passing a European Union sponsored resolution calling for an end to "serious and continuing human rights violations", as well as criticism by the US Helsinki Commission. US Secretary of State Colin Powell told this month's OSCE ministerial meeting that "Turkmenistan's persecution of political opponents and religious minorities violates the letter and the spirit of the Helsinki Act." Religious minorities inside Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 of their continuing concerns about how the new law may be used to criminalise religious belief and practice. However a Baptist told Forum 18 that "The rulers of Turkmenistan are not in charge, God is still in his place."

Officials still do not know how fiercely to implement Turkmenistan's highly restrictive new religion law, which for the first time formally criminalises unregistered religious activity, sources have told Forum 18 News Service. "Officials are still waiting for instructions from on high as to how it should be implemented," one member of a minority faith that has not been able to gain official registration told Forum 18. "But there is strong pressure in the air." The source declared that no criminal cases are known to have been launched against leaders or members of unregistered communities of that particular religious group.

The new law, which was signed by President Saparmurat Niyazov on 21 October and which came into force on its publication on 10 November (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180), has been widely criticised by religious communities, human rights groups and foreign governments.

Turkmenistan already had the tightest controls on religious activity before the new law criminalising unregistered religious activity came into force (see F18News October 2003 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151). All Shia Muslim, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Armenian Apostolic, Lutheran, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness, Baha'i and Jewish activity was already treated as illegal. Believers have been fined, detained, beaten, threatened, sacked from their jobs, had their homes confiscated, banished to remote parts of the country or deported in retaliation for involvement in unregistered religious activity.

The Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, a group that opposes registration on principle in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates, issued a statement in Moscow on 14 November criticising the new law and the new articles of the Criminal Code that spell out punishments for leading or taking part in unregistered religious activity. Many Baptist congregations have already faced raids, threats and fines for their religious activity which have been stepped up this year.

Pointing out that Turkmenistan is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Baptists declare that they will press for the law to be "brought into conformity with international norms of human rights". Citing the Acts of the Apostles, they recall that the Christians of the first century prayed to God to "look on the threats [of the authorities] and grant your servants to speak your word with boldness".

In the wake of the adoption of the new law, Baptist congregations across the country held a three-day session of prayer and fasting. One Baptist source told Forum 18 that there have so far been no reports of heightened repression against Baptist congregations. "The rulers of Turkmenistan are not in charge," the Baptist declared defiantly. "God is still in his place."

Also criticising the new religion law as an "expression of the hardening attitude of the Niyazov regime in restricting religious freedom and human rights" was the Turkmenistan Helsinki Committee, a group based in Bulgaria made up of activists who have been forced to flee their homeland. "There is no doubt that the new law is designed to hinder, not to promote freedom of religious confession." It said the new law restricts religious rights even further, violating Turkmenistan's international human rights commitments.

International criticism of Turkmenistan's violations of human rights is mounting. On 24 November the United Nations General

Assembly's human rights committee approved a European Union-sponsored resolution calling on Turkmenistan to end "serious and continuing human rights violations". The committee approved the measure by a vote of 72 to 37, with 53 abstentions and the resolution is now likely to be adopted by the full General Assembly.

A spokesperson for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Directorate of the European Commission told Forum 18 from Brussels on 2 December that the resolution was part of a long-term process. "The EU has wished to maintain pressure on the regime in Ashgabad as a useful means of achieving change in the policies of the government of Turkmenistan."

The resolution followed several EU moves, including a resolution adopted in April at the UN human rights committee in Geneva. "The EU will continue its efforts towards meaningful dialogue with Turkmenistan in the coming months," the spokesperson added.

Also criticising Turkmenistan has been the US Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency that monitors compliance with OSCE human rights commitments. In a 2 December statement, the commission condemned what it called the new "highly repressive law against religion" and urged Secretary of State Colin Powell to designate Turkmenistan as a "Country of Particular Concern," in the light of the "growing repression against those who seek to profess and practise their faith".

In his speech to the OSCE ministerial meeting in Maastricht on 2 December, Powell complained that "Turkmenistan's persecution of political opponents and religious minorities violates the letter and the spirit of the Helsinki Act."

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses say it is too early to say how the new law will be implemented, but say their communities already face difficulties. Sources have told Forum 18 that known Jehovah's Witnesses are invited or brought to the 6th department of the Interior Ministry (which combats organised crime and terrorism) and questioned. "Sometimes this is done with threats and insults only, sometimes they are heavily beaten up," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They said that during the summer such pressure was even heavier than now, although it continues.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also report that the authorities have continued to fine people 250,000 to 1,000,000 manats (325 to 1300 Norwegian kroner, 40 to 160 Euros or 49 to 196 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) just for having a Bible or biblical literature in the bag or meeting together in a private flat. "There is the danger that with the implementation of the new law, all such cases will be prosecuted as criminal cases and the believers may be sentenced to prison terms."

A Protestant from a church that has several congregations in different towns across Turkmenistan told Forum 18 that church members are concerned about the new law, but are continuing to meet as unostentatiously as they can to try to avoid problems. The Protestant said that the congregations have not faced any special problems in recent months and it is too early to see what impact the new law will have on them.

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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