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TURKMENISTAN: Fears grow for imprisoned Baptist

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

It is feared that detained Baptist Geldy Khudaikuliev may not be released as promised by Turkmen secret police officers, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, and concerns are growing that he may have criminal charges laid against him and be being tortured. The family has been told that he is being held at the main headquarters of the National Security Ministry in the capital Ashgabad, and access to him is not being permitted. Khudaikuliev leads a small Baptist community in the town of Geok-Tepe, 50 kilometres (30 miles) west of Ashgabad. Like all non-Sunni Muslim and all non-Russian Orthodox communities it does not have state registration and the government treats all its activity as illegal. He had travelled to Ashgabad to collect money that had been transferred to him, and was then detained by the National Security Ministry, which has declined to discuss his case with Forum 18.

The family of detained Baptist Geldy Khudaikuliev fear that he may not be released in ten days as promised by National Security Ministry officers, although officially no charges have been laid against him, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Khudaikuliev was detained on 15 December in the capital Ashgabad and for several days his family did not know what had happened to him, Protestant sources who did not want to be identified told Forum 18. The family was later told that he was being held at the main headquarters of the National Security Ministry in Ashgabad, though no-one is being allowed access to him.

"We fear he may not be released as scheduled but they will try to hang criminal charges on him," sources told Forum 18. "We are also worried because torture is routine in the National Security headquarters." It is believed that Geldy Khudaikuliev may have been under torture for the past two or three days.

Khudaikuliev leads a small Baptist community in the town of Geok-Tepe, 50 kilometres (30 miles) west of Ashgabad. Like all non-Sunni Muslim and all non-Russian Orthodox communities it does not have state registration and the government treats all its activity as illegal. He had travelled to Ashgabad to collect money that had been transferred to him from the office of Western Union. It remains unclear whether he withdrew the money or not, although Western Union apparently told those who had sent the money that it had been withdrawn on 13 December. It remains unclear whether Khudaikuliev withdrew the money or not.

Khudaikuliev is not known to have suffered direct pressure from the authorities before. He is not known to have been interrogated or fined for his work for his church. When contacted by Forum 18, no National Security Ministry official was willing to discuss the case.

The Turkmen authorities allow only Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities to have state registration, and have last month outlawed all unregistered religious activity with a new religion law. This defies the international human rights agreements Turkmenistan has signed (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180). Even before the new law came into force, Forum 18 knew of religious believers being fined, detained, beaten, threatened, sacked from their jobs, having their homes confiscated, banished to remote parts of the country or deported for unregistered religious activity.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY