
9 January 2004

TURKMENISTAN: Heavy fines on Balkanabad Baptists

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the first case known to Forum 18 News Service of penalties imposed on believers for meeting for worship since Turkmenistan's harsh new law on religion came into force last November, twelve members of a Baptist church in the western town of Balkanabad were given fines of 75 US dollars each, more than one month's wages. The fines followed a police raid on the unregistered church during Sunday worship in late November and came on top of earlier fines last year. A 7 January statement from the Baptists reaching Forum 18 reported that officials "also warned the brothers and sisters that in the event of a repeated violation, the size of the fine would be much higher, while for a third violation they would be responsible under the criminal code".

A month after their Sunday service was raided by anti-terrorist police, twelve members of a Baptist church in Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) in the west of the country have been handed down heavy fines, reports a 7 January statement from local Baptists reaching Forum 18 News Service. They were accused under the code of administrative offences of violating the harsh new religion law which came into force last November and which punishes unregistered religious activity. An administrative commission handed down fines of 1,500,000 manats (500 Norwegian kroner, 60 Euros or 75 US dollars at the street exchange rate) on each of the twelve, far more than one month's wages, as the Baptists point out.

Police who raided the 30 November service took all those present, including children, to the police station and warned church members that they would face severe punishments if they continued to worship without state registration. One of the Baptist women was threatened that her four children would be taken from her and placed in a children's home. The raid was led by Major Aman Annayev, the head of the town's sixth police department, which is responsible for combating organised crime and terrorism, but reached by telephone at his office in Balkanabad on 8 December, he categorically refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 (see F18News 9 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=208).

Summoned and fined on 23 December were Boris Grishin, Olga Vasilieva, Marina Chukileva and Lyudmila Tabalenkova. On 2 January it was the turn of Tatyana Kosenchuk, Mariya Vilko, Maksim Grishin, Yury Kippa and Vitaly Konovalov. The final group was fined on 4 January: Taniel Ramazanov, Nikolai Matsenko and Albina Matsenko. "They also warned the brothers and sisters that in the event of a repeated violation, the size of the fine would be much higher, while for a third violation they would be responsible under the criminal code," the Baptist statement added.

The Balkanabad Baptists belong to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists). The Council of Churches split from other Baptists in 1961, when state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since. The authorities have already handed down steadily-increasing fines on the Balkanabad church for continuing to hold unregistered prayer meetings.

The new religion law, which came into force on 10 November 2003, outlaws all unregistered religious activity, while a criminal code amendment prescribes penalties for breaking the law of up to a year of "corrective labour" (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180).

As the authorities allow only Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities to register, this was a considerable further move in repressing minority faiths. Even before the new law came into force, Forum 18 knows of religious believers having been fined, detained, beaten, threatened, sacked from their jobs, had 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