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TURKMENISTAN: Raids, fines, torture, detentions, threats

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Dashoguz Police threatened to inject a Jehovah's Witness with drugs and send her to a psychiatric hospital. Officers detaining a Jehovah's Witness in Turkmenabad "twisted his hands, strangled him, threw him to the floor, and forcefully shut his mouth to keep him from calling for help".

The authorities continue to conduct raids on meetings for worship and homes, detain, torture, threaten and fine individuals, and seize religious literature in house searches. In many incidents, male police officers physically assault women trying to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. In one case, police threatened to inject a woman with drugs and send her to a psychiatric hospital.

"In the past year Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to beatings, intimidation, unwarranted searches, detention, seizure of religious publications, and fines merely for attending worship services and otherwise manifesting their religious beliefs," Jehovah's Witnesses note. They point out that most of the incidents for their adherents occurred in the eastern Lebap Region, in particular the regional capital Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjou).

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed concern about Turkmenistan's treatment of those exercising freedom of religion or belief and called for an end to such violations (see below).

No official could be reached to explain why individuals are punished to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. The telephone of Pirnazar Hudainazarov, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] was not answered any time Forum 18 called on 2 and 3 October. He was part of a government delegation to UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) hearings on the country in November 2016, and did not answer either the CAT's or Forum 18's questions on the torture of prisoners (see F18News 6 December 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2236>). The CAT's January 2017 Concluding Observations (CAT/C/TKM/CO/2) state that it is "seriously concerned about consistent allegations of widespread torture and ill-treatment, including severe beatings, of persons deprived of their liberty, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, mainly in order to extract confessions. It is also gravely concerned about continued reports about impunity for acts of torture since no cases of torture have been recorded or examined by the State party's courts during either the previous or the current reporting periods" (see F18News 27 September 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318>).

Similarly unanswered on 2 and 3 October was the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, a Deputy Chair of the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production (the body that replaced the Gengesh for Religious Affairs in 2015).

These violations of freedom of religion or belief come as religious communities that want to gain legal status once more subject themselves to another compulsory round of re-registration mandated under the 2016 Religion Law. Independent Muslim communities are not allowed to exist, while only two non-Muslim communities have been allowed to gain state registration and so permission to exist (see F18News 9 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2323>).

Meanwhile it appears that the number of Muslims the Turkmen government allowed to go on this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca - just 160 - was the lowest since 2009, when the government allowed no pilgrims to travel (see F18News 4 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2321>).

Renewed United Nations concern

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed wide-ranging concerns about Turkmenistan's treatment of those exercising freedom of religion or belief in its Concluding Observations, adopted on 23 March (CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2).

Turkmen officials repeatedly avoided answering questions at hearings on the country's record in Geneva in March. Questions that went unanswered included those on bans on exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief without state registration, punishments for those who do exercise these rights, including arrests and imprisonments, and seizures of property. Turkmen officials

failed to answer questions in why the state interferes in the Muslim community's nomination of muftis and imams.

Delegates also asked about two Muslims who died in 2016 in the top-security Ovadan-Depe top-security labour camp, Lukman Yaylanov and Narkuly Baltayev (see F18News 23 January 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2249>), tortured Jehovah's Witness Bibi Rahmanova and her husband (see F18News 20 August 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1987>), and tortured Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov, who remains in prison (see below). However, Turkmen officials also failed to answer these questions.

In its Concluding Observations the UN Committee expressed concern that the legal framework - including the 2016 Religion Law - "retains undue restrictions on freedom of religious belief, such as the mandatory registration of religious organizations and obstacles to registration, and restrictions on religious education and importation and distribution of religious literature. It is also concerned about the reported denial of registration of religious minority communities, raids and confiscation of religious literature and intimidation, arrests and imprisonment of members of religious communities, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses".

The Committee called on Turkmenistan to halt all violations, bring laws into line with international human rights commitments and "investigate all acts of undue interference with the freedom of religion of religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Muslims".

The UN Committee also expressed concern about the demolition of mosques and churches in Ashgabad, including the April 2016 bulldozing of a mosque, with the authorities claiming it had been built without permission over 20 years earlier.

The Sunni Muslim Aksa Mosque in Ashgabad bulldozed by the Hyakimlik (administration) was the eighth of 14 mosques in the city to have been destroyed in recent years (see F18News 18 April 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2169>).

The UN Committee called on Turkmenistan to end prosecutions of those unable on grounds of conscience to conduct compulsory military service, change the law and "provide for alternative service of a civilian nature outside the military sphere and not under military command for conscientious objectors".

These calls echoed the comments of the UN Committee Against Torture in its Concluding Observations on Turkmenistan's record (CAT/C/TKM/CO/2), adopted in December 2016 (see F18News 27 September 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318>).

State torture or threats of torture

On 17 May, three officers in plainclothes approached a Jehovah's Witness sitting on the street near his work in Turkmenabad. One officer, who introduced himself as Mekan Veliyev, demanded that he give them the keys to his flat. When they found keys at his workplace, they took him to his flat.

"Officers Veliyev and Haytyev twisted his hands, strangled him, threw him to the floor, and forcefully shut his mouth to keep him from calling for help," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "They opened the door to conduct an unauthorised search and seized his passport, personal books, and laptop computer, and then brought him to the police station." That same evening, the Jehovah's Witness was fired from his employment.

Turkmenabad-based Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officer Veliyev (or who gives his name as Mekan Veliyev) has taken part in earlier torture of Jehovah's Witnesses, including prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov (see F18News 21 May 2015 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2063>).

Also in Turkmenabad, on 20 January about 15 law enforcement officers raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness family. Officers took 14 of their guests to the police station. During the raid, officers seized personal copies of religious publications, laptop computers, tablets and mobile phones.

Officers beat a male Jehovah's Witness, and later others as the officers demanded they provide the passwords for their tablets. "Officer Suleyman hit a 14-year-old boy in his stomach and face, and threw his mother to the floor," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "The officers were rude and threatened all in attendance with 10-15 years of imprisonment." At 2 o'clock the following morning, officers released all except the homeowner and another male Jehovah's Witness.

In an earlier incident in Turkmenabad, on 27 December 2016 a local police officer, Didar Saparov, MSS secret police officer Mekan Veliyev, and two police officers (including A. Hidayberdiyev) raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness and her three children.

"They treated the family rudely as they carried out the unwarranted search, at one point grabbing the woman by her neck and pressing her against the wall," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "Mekan Veliyev grabbed and held the oldest daughter by her hair. Both women had bruises." Officers seized a personal copy of the Bible and took the adult Jehovah's Witness to the police station.

Turkmenabad Prosecutor's Office acknowledged the complaint she later filed and confirmed the fact of the bruises, but denied any wrongdoing in the actions of police officers. A further complaint was filed with the Regional Prosecutor's Office. "A response is still pending," Jehovah's Witnesses note.

In another serious case in the northern city of Dashoguz, on 7 October 2016 police officers detained a Jehovah's Witness on the street and brought her to the police station. Officers searched her mobile phone, and threatened to inject her with drugs and send her to a rehabilitation centre or psychiatric hospital. Then they brought her to her flat, searched it, and seized her personal copy of the Bible and passport.

"Brutal beatings" continue in prison

The authorities have repeatedly failed to include Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov in regular prisoner amnesties. "Bahram is detained in a notoriously wretched labour camp in the town of Seydi, where he has suffered repeated interrogations and brutal beatings at the hands of the authorities," Jehovah's Witnesses complain. Hemdemov's wife, Gulzira, has been able to visit him periodically.

The 54-year-old Hemdemov, who is married with four sons, was an elder of his Jehovah's Witness community. He has been imprisoned since 14 March 2015 to punish him for hosting an "illegal" religious meeting in his home. He is currently serving a four-year general regime prison term in Seydi Labour Camp on charges of "inciting religious hatred", which he adamantly rejected (see F18News 5 July 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196>).

On 15 August 2016, an appeal on Hemdemov's behalf was sent to the UN Human Rights Committee.

Turkmen officials repeatedly avoided answering questions about the torture of Hemdemov at hearings of the country's record at the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva in March 2017 (see above).

The three young Muslim prisoners of conscience from Turkmenabad known to have died in the top-security Ovadan-Depe prison appear to have been tortured. When Aziz Gafurov's thin body was returned to relatives in June it was covered in bruises, according to an eyewitness (see F18News 27 September 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318>).

Further raids, threats

Raids and detentions are often followed by fines. Many individuals are fined under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), particularly Part 1.

Part 1 punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducted religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance" with a fine on individuals of 1 to 2 base units, on officials of 2 to 5 base units and on legal organisations of 5 to 10 base units (each base unit is 100 Manats).

Each 100 Manats is equivalent to 230 Norwegian Kroner, 25 Euros or 30 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate, but half that at the street rate.

In autumn 2017, police raided the home of several Protestants in Turkmenabad, confiscating computers, Protestants told Forum 18.

On 18 July, three police officers, including Murat Nasyrov, raided the house of a female Jehovah's Witness in Turkmenabad, without permission, to disrupt a religious meeting with eleven in attendance. The officers switched off the electricity in the home to force the group outside. After some time, another three police officers arrived, including district police officer Sadridin Kabulov. They interrogated even a ten-year old and treated the Jehovah's Witnesses "rudely". The officers brought a female Jehovah's Witness from the group to the police station and threatened her.

On 13 June in Lebap Region, Police Inspector Merdan (last name unknown) invited a male Jehovah's Witness to the local police station "under false pretences". When he arrived, Sultan (last name unknown), an officer from the Migration Police, told him that they invited him to talk about his religion. Officers claimed they needed to search his flat because they believed that a "terrorist" was hiding in his home and that weapons are stored there. The Jehovah's Witness filed a complaint.

On 22 May, the local house manager came to the flat of a female Jehovah's Witness in Turkmenabad. When she opened the door, two unknown men forced their way in. One of the officers was Soltan Orazov from the Migration Police. The officers searched the flat and seized her personal computer and a phone. The officers took the woman to the police station. There "they made accusations about her moral character, grabbed her by the neck, injured her hand by pressing it to the table, and threatened her with administrative liability", Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

On 19 May in Mary, police officers Shatlyk and Gurbanmyrat Abdullayev detained a female Jehovah's Witness and "brought her to

the police station by forcefully shoving her into a car, causing bruises on her arms". Officers demanded that she write an explanatory note. The chief of the police department, Hezretgulyev, demanded that she stop talking to others about her faith, and then ordered the officers to write a protocol and release her.

However, Officer Shatlyk attempted to accuse her of wrongdoing. That afternoon, four hours after detaining her, Sergeant Suvkhanov had her brought to a temporary detention centre, where they held her until early evening. The next day she went to a hospital for a medical examination to confirm the rough treatment she had received. The police officers involved came to the hospital and threatened her with an administrative offence.

In mid-May, police raided a place where a group of Protestants were meeting. They detained the leader and seized the place.

Elsewhere in mid-May, police detained the female leader of a Protestant religious community. The woman's neighbour had attended a meeting for worship, stolen a Bible and then reported the woman to the police.

Courts in Turkmenabad handed out "small" fines to several Protestants during the summer to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, one Protestant told Forum 18.

On 24 February, police officers and an imam in Serakhs in Akhal Region raided the home of a female Jehovah's Witness, where a group of 11 were meeting to discuss their faith. The intruders conducted a search without a warrant and confiscated Bibles, personal copies of religious publications, a computer, and other items. All present were taken to the police station, where they were photographed and fingerprinted. On 28 February, Serakhs City Court fined six individuals 500 Manats each. Akhal Regional Court rejected the individuals' appeals.

Earlier fines

Fines to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, mostly under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), have been common (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244>).

On 22 December 2016, Police took a female Jehovah's Witness in Lebap Region directly to court. The judge fined her 500 Manats and ordered that her computer be handed to the state. Ten police officers had raided her home without a warrant on 23 November 2016. They seized a copy of the "Injil" (New Testament in Turkmen) and her computer.

In Ashgabad, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were each fined 400 Manats after police officers detained them on 25 October 2016.

In summer 2016, a Protestant was fined 4,000 Manats in punishment for distributing Christian discs, Protestants told Forum 18. Police also confiscated the discs and a machine for duplicating them.

Beatings reflect "incompetence"?

On 8 February 2017 local Jehovah's Witnesses visited the Interior Ministry in Ashgabad. They discussed with officials cases where police officers have pressured Jehovah's Witnesses. "Ministry representatives explained that it is part of their work to undertake certain measures in connection with Jehovah's Witnesses, including detentions and summons," Jehovah's Witnesses noted, "but the cruel actions of some officers reflect the incompetence of those officers." (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=2244>.

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://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>>.

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