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TURKMENISTAN: Pressure in schools, sackings, haj restrictions

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Teachers and police intimidate Jehovah's Witness children in schools, including for refusing to wear the national flag. Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have been sacked from state jobs. A student was expelled from university. This year had the smallest government-sponsored haj pilgrimage group since 2009.

School children in Turkmenistan continue to face pressure from education officials and police if they are known to be members of religious communities the authorities do not like. Police and education officials have brought in state-appointed Muslim clerics to intimidate children from non-Muslim faiths. A woman was expelled from a university in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] for meeting with Jehovah's Witnesses.

Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been sacked from state jobs in the past year, especially from the army and hospitals, because they exercised their right to freedom of religion or belief (see below).

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. The haj is an obligation for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford it at least once in their lifetime. The government has severely restricted its citizens' participation in the past two decades. It has never explained why it does so (see below).

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. Russian Orthodox, Catholics and others are still waiting for the Justice Ministry to re-register their communities. 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).

Harassment of school children

Protestant and Jehovah's Witness children, particularly outside Ashgabat, face pressure in schools because of their faith. Teachers, school principals, local officials and Muslim clerics have all publicly vilified non-Muslim children.

Jehovah's Witness children face additional pressures because of their refusal, on religious grounds, to wear the national flag, sing the national anthem or recite the national oath.

According to the 2007 Law on the National Oath, the text reads in translation: "Turkmenistan, my beloved homeland, my native land, I am always with you in my thoughts and in my heart. For the slightest evil against you let my hand be removed. For the slightest slander about you let my tongue become powerless. At the moment of my betrayal of my motherland, of the President of Turkmenistan, of your sacred banner, let my breath stop."

Jehovah's Witnesses would not treat a national flag with disrespect, but would not show any veneration for it, such as by wearing a pin with its image. Similarly, they would not sing a national anthem or, in countries that have them, recite a national oath.

On 3 April, a Jehovah's Witness was summoned to her son's school in Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjou), Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The teacher was pressuring the boy, who is in the second year, to wear a pin with the national flag. The school principal asked the mother to write an explanatory note.

The next day, the boy's sister, a student at the same school, was similarly summoned to the office of the director of studies. Later the girl's teacher told her that documents about her had been handed to the police inspector. When the girl's mother asked the principal to provide the legal basis for the requirement to wear a pin, the principal began to threaten her. On 14 April the director of studies summoned the girl to her office for the local police inspector to question her about her religious beliefs.

On 30 January the director of studies of a school in Turkmenabad brought two Jehovah's Witness students of the 10th and 8th grades

to her office. She demanded that they sign a pledge that they "will not trust in other religions anymore", a reference to non-Muslim faiths.

The school then summoned the students' mother. A police officer demanded that she explain why her children do not wear a pin in the form of the national flag, do not sing the national anthem, and do not recite the national oath. When she asked them to show her the law requiring them to do so, they threatened that they would search her home.

On 14 January, the Azadi National Institute of World Languages in Ashgabad expelled a student because she is studying the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses. Prior to that, the university administration had repeatedly pressured to participate in events that contradicted her religious beliefs, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

On 21 November 2016 a Jehovah's Witness was invited to visit the principal's office in the school in Dashoguz where her children are enrolled. When she arrived she found present her children, several teachers, and three law enforcement officers. The officers demanded that the mother explain why her children do not wear a pin in the form of the national flag; they demanded that her son recite the national oath.

The teachers began to explain to the officers that the woman's children are well-behaved, but the officers were very rude. They asked the Jehovah's Witness to bring her personal Bible to them. The next day they made inquiries about her husband.

On 18 October 2016 a Jehovah's Witness in the 10th grade of a Turkmenabad school was invited to visit the principal's office. In the office two police officers, along with Islamic clerics, were present. They questioned the student and demanded that he write an explanatory note. The officers searched his mobile phone.

State-backed denigration of rival faiths

In March 2017, the local imam held a numbers of meetings at schools and kindergartens in the southern town of Tejen. He warned about the "danger of the sect named Jehovah's Witnesses" and "slandered the moral character of a local Witness", Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

Parents have in the past been summoned to school meetings at which members of non-Muslim faiths – especially Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses – are publicly vilified (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

Dismissals

People employed by the state have often been dismissed because they exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

A Muslim who asked not to be identified was dismissed from the armed forces after he refused to stop praying the namaz, as he told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service for a 17 March article. Officers initially instructed him to stop praying the namaz at work. Then his home was searched and a Koran was seized.

As the Muslim continued to pray the namaz he was summoned to the Defence Ministry. There officers demanded that he write a statement and a letter of resignation. He and his family were also forced to leave their service accommodation.

Such cases of Muslim military personnel and workers of other state agencies being sacked for refusing to stop praying the namaz appear to be becoming more frequent, Radio Free Europe noted.

Another former worker of a state organisation told Radio Free Europe that he had also been sacked for refusing to stop praying the namaz.

On 1 November 2016 a Jehovah's Witness employed at a school in Dashoguz was summoned to the school principal. Later, both of them reported to the regional Education Department. The head of the Department told the Jehovah's Witness that she has to write a letter of resignation of her own will, since as a Jehovah's Witness she cannot work at the school. The head also demanded that she bring in her personal religious publications. On 4 November 2016 the school principal again summoned her to the office, where two officers questioned her about her religious beliefs.

Only 160 haj pilgrims?

The Turkmen government appears to have allowed only 160 pilgrims to go on this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca. "The President of Turkmenistan signed an instruction under which 160 pilgrims will undertake the haj to Saudi Arabia from 17 August to 7 September 2017," the government website noted on 1 August. It added that Turkmen Airlines would fly them to and from Saudi Arabia at its cost.

As usual the government announcement made no mention of whether pilgrims could travel on the haj outside the government-sponsored group.

On 15 August, officials at the consular department of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Ashgabad told Forum 18 that all the haj visas had already been issued. However, officials refused to say how many it had issued or whether it had issued them only to members of the government-sponsored group.

The man who on 15 August answered 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), put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

An official of Balkan Region Religious Affairs office refused to tell Forum 18 on 15 August how many pilgrims had been approved from that region. Telephones at Religious Affairs offices of other regions went unanswered.

Usually the government allows between 180 and 190 pilgrims in the government-sponsored group. This year was the lowest since 2009, when the government allowed no pilgrims to travel, claiming that health concerns prevented any travel on the haj that year (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

The known exceptions were in 2013 – when the Turkmen government asked the Saudi Arabian authorities to allocate 1,277 visas – and in 2014 – when it asked for 650, a Saudi Arabian consular official told Forum 18 in 2014 (see F18News 25 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1988).

The quota the Saudi Arabian government allocated to Turkmenistan for the haj in 2014 was 4,600, the Saudi Arabian consular official told Forum 18 that year. The Turkmen government has never explained why it allows far fewer people to undertake the haj.

Secret police approval

Those that are allowed to join the government-sponsored haj group have to be approved by a range of state agencies, according to the Balkan Region Religious Affairs official. He identified these as the state-controlled Muftiate and the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations. "Everything is resolved in Ashgabad," he insisted to Forum 18.

However, it is known that the local Hyakimlik (administration), the police and, most importantly, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police have to give approval for each haj pilgrim (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

Individuals on the government's blacklist of those unable to leave the country cannot apply to join the haj group, but others too face difficulties for political reasons. "Individuals themselves can be worthy in all ways to travel to Mecca," Amanmyrat Bugayev, an Ashgabad-based writer, told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen service for a 31 August 2016 broadcast. "But if it turns out that someone in their extended family or close friends interprets the policies underway in the country differently, you can be sure that a range of reasons will be found to remove them from the list of pilgrims travelling to Mecca."

One woman who had been told by officials in early 2017 that she was on the list to travel this year was told several months later that there had been a mistake, one Ashgabad resident told Forum 18 on 4 October. Officials cited connections her husband had with former residents of Turkmenistan now working abroad.

The cost for joining the government-sponsored group is reportedly high. While the official price in 2014 was 5,000 Manats (then 11,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,300 Euros or 1,800 US Dollars). The official cost in 2017 appears to have been about 7,000 Manats, but the real cost might be five times that, one Muslim who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 in early 2017.

Even those who get a place on the government-sponsored group can be removed right up to departure. "I know cases when even after preparing all documents and passing through all the controls, people have been removed from the plane as it prepared to leave for Saudi Arabia," Bugayev noted in August 2016.

Those unable to get a place on the Turkmen government-sponsored list and who can afford it try to travel on the haj via third countries on the quota of those countries. One person put the number each year at about 2,000, but noted this was now becoming more difficult in Iran and Turkey. (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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