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TURKMENISTAN: Appeals against 12-year jail terms fail

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Five Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi have failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

On 11 July, the Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] upheld the 12-year jail terms handed down in Balkan Region in August 2017 to punish five Muslims who met with others to study their faith using the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.

Four of the five are believed to be in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect (see below).

Meanwhile, a Turkmen citizen returning from working in Turkey told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service that he was held for two days on arrival at Ashgabad airport in mid-July after secret police border guards found out he prayed the namaz (Muslim prayers) regularly and had photos of mosques and himself at prayer on his mobile phone. Border guards accused him of being a terrorist (see below).

Turkmen citizens returning to the country from Turkey have long complained of intrusive questioning at Ashgabad airport about whether they pray and visit the mosque. Women working there or married to Turks particularly complained earlier in the year (see below).

Forum 18 tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament. Her assistant - who did not give his name - told Forum 18 on 27 July that she was on a work trip and would be back at her desk on 30 July.

Supreme Court appeal fails

Five Muslims jailed in August 2017 in Balkan Region of western Turkmenistan failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at the Supreme Court in Ashgabad on 11 July 2018. "Their appeals left the lower court decision unchanged," a court official who did not give their name told Forum 18.

Forum 18 was unable to find out if the five men were brought to the court from prison for the appeal hearing, nor whether they were represented by a lawyer.

The men could appeal further, this time to the chair of the Supreme Court for a supervisory appeal.

The five Muslims had met with others to pray and study their faith, using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The authorities arrested the five men in May and June 2017. On 15 August 2017, a panel of three judges at Balkan Regional Court in the regional capital Balkanabad sentenced the five men to 12-year jail terms in strict regime labour camps. The court ordered that religious literature, mobile phones and cash be seized from them (see F18News 10 July 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2393>).

The five Muslims jailed were:

- 1) Jumanazar Yuldashowich Hojambetow, born 17 April 1981, ethnic Uzbek, single, unemployed, lived in Koneurgench and Balkanabad
- 2) Begejik Begejikow, born 23 January 1963, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in Balkanabad
- 3) Ahmet Bayramberdiyewich Mammedurdyew, born 13 August 1978, ethnic Turkmen, married with 2 children, worked as guard

at oil company, lived in Balkanabad

4) Meret Hydyrowich Owezow, born 16 February 1960, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in village of Gokje in Mary Region

5) Myratdurdy Shamyradow, born 7 May 1973, ethnic Turkmen, married, businessman, lived in Mollanepes in Mary Region

Harsh prison conditions

Despite the verdict that states that the five men were to serve their terms at a strict regime labour camp, four of the five men were transferred to the much harsher Ovadan-Depe prison.

The isolated top-security prison is located in the Karakum Desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Other prisoners in Ovadan-Depe are known to have been tortured, and some have died from maltreatment or neglect. Relatives of other prisoners held there often have no information as to whether they are still alive (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2244>).

The fifth prisoner - apparently a former police officer or other official - was sent to serve his sentence at the special labour camp for former law-enforcement officials at Akdash near Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) in Balkan Region (BL-K/4).

Forum 18 has been unable to establish which four prisoners of conscience were sent to Ovadan-Depe and which one to Akdash.

The address of Ovadan-Depe Prison is:

Ahal velayat

Upravlenie politsii Ahalskogo velayata

uchr. AH-T/2

Turkmenistan

Two-day airport detention

A Turkmen citizen who arrived back at Ashgabad airport on 10 July was questioned about his exercise of freedom of religion or belief while in Turkey and detained for two days, he told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service for a report published on 18 July, asking that his name not be given.

After finding out that he had been working in Turkey, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers then asked him whether he prayed the namaz. After he said he attended Friday prayers regularly, they asked him to hand over his mobile phone, which they began looking through. The officers found photos of mosques, prayer beads and the man praying.

"They started to ask me and intimidate me: 'What are you brother, a terrorist?'," the man told Radio Free Europe. "You must be bringing in weapons from abroad? What organisation are you in? Tell us the name of the organisation or we'll start to torture you," the man quoted the MSS secret police officers as having told him.

The man responded to the MSS secret police officers that he had no connection with any organisation or subversive group and the fact that he prayed the namaz regularly did not make him a terrorist. He then went on to complain that no action was taken against people who drink vodka, "but why do you harass people like me who pray the namaz?"

After the officers told him to stop complaining and to answer their questions, the man told them he was not afraid to be locked up for praying the namaz. MSS secret police officers held him at the airport for two days before allowing him home. During his detention, the man received calls from worried relatives asking where he was.

The man said he wanted Radio Free Europe to publish his story to warn other Turkmen citizens who have been working abroad of the reception they could receive on arriving back at Ashgabad airport.

Forum 18 has been unable to verify independently the man's report. However, over many years security officials have questioned Turkmen citizens arriving at the airport (as well as at other border crossings) about whether they are religious, inspected and often seized religious literature or other items they might have and searched mobile phones for any religious content (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244>).

"How often do you pray the namaz?"

Earlier in the year, Turkmen women with residence permits for Turkey (some of them married to Turkish citizens), especially those who wore hijabs, were questioned intensively at Ashgabad airport on their return to Turkmenistan. "Why do you wear a headscarf?" one woman cited MSS secret police officers as asking her in a 24 January report on Alternative Turkmenistan News. "How often do you pray the namaz? Do you go to the mosque? Does your husband go to the mosque? How long have you been religiously active?"

MSS secret police officers took the woman, and several others in similar situations from the same inbound flight, to a separate room for questioning. They also checked the content of their phones. (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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