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TURKMENISTAN: 24 hours in airport, travel ban for Korans

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Security personnel at Ashgabad Airport detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours. She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan. Police are again forcibly shaving men under 40 with beards. Officers forced one victim to drink alcohol.

In late December 2018, security personnel at the airport in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] detained a local woman returning from work in Turkey because she had brought back copies of the Koran. Officers seized the Korans. She was held for 24 hours in the airport before being allowed to travel on to her home town. When she tried to return to Turkey in January, security personnel at the airport stopped her from leaving.

Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service, which reported on the detention, literature seizure and exit denial on 23 January, did not identify the Lebap Region resident for fear of state reprisals.

An official of the Migration Service in Ashgabad refused to discuss such exit bans with Forum 18. Forum 18 was unable to reach other officials (see below).

Meanwhile, police have stepped up their campaign to stop men under the age of 40 from wearing beards. They have forcibly shaved some and pressured others to shave. Police appear to believe that young men who wear beards encourage Muslims to become extreme (see below).

In one case in Lebap Region, officers forced a young man they had detained not only to shave but to drink alcohol (see below).

In recent years, police have intermittently detained young men with beards and forcibly shaved them. Sometimes this is accompanied by forced drinking of alcohol and eating of pork, both unacceptable for devout Muslims (see below).

The authorities impose tight restrictions over all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Worship and religious meetings without state permission are illegal, officials refuse state registration to many religious communities (including Muslim communities outside the state-backed Muslim Board), all religious literature is subject to state censorship, and individuals are jailed to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief outside state controls.

(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

No answers

Forum 18 again tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament, to find out why individuals are stopped at Ashgabad Airport because they have religious literature, why they are banned from leaving Turkmenistan, why young men under 40 are not allowed to choose to have a beard and why police forcibly shave them and force some to drink alcohol.

An official told Forum 18 on 5 February that Gurbannazarova was not in the office. The official said Maysa Muradova, head of the department, was in a meeting and asked Forum 18 to call back in 15 minutes. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

Forum 18 also again tried to call Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee. His phone went unanswered on 5 February.

Similarly unanswered on 5 February was the phone 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.

Airport detention for Arabic Korans

Security personnel at Ashgabad's international airport found several copies of the Koran in Arabic in the luggage of a Turkmen woman returning from Turkey in late December 2018. The woman, who works legally in Turkey, had returned to visit relatives in the eastern Lebap Region. She had brought the Korans as gifts, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted. Officers seized the Korans and souvenirs she had with Arabic inscriptions.

A uniformed police officer and two men in civilian clothes called her over after she had passed through passport control and took her away for questioning. Their questions mainly focused on why she was bringing the Korans into the country.

"The police officer asked no questions, but the men in civilian clothes asked questions one after the other," the woman told Radio Free Europe, "and when necessary they were ready to put moral pressure on me." She said the two men shouted at her: "Aren't you ashamed bringing such books with you, you're a woman! So you're trying to bring in religious/political propaganda!"

Other victims who have been held because they had religious literature and witnesses have told Radio Free Europe that officers behave crudely and in a prejudiced way.

The officers also questioned the way the woman was dressed and why she had not dyed her hair.

The officers then demanded that the woman read out a passage from the Koran for them, apparently to find out if she knew how to read the text. She refused to read from it without ritually washing herself. The officers forced her to read from the Koran. The following morning, they brought an imam from an Ashgabad mosque who listened to her reading and confirmed her correct pronunciation and understanding of the Arabic.

Only after she had been held in the airport for 24 hours did the officers allow the woman to leave. Once she had reached her relatives in Lebap Region, local security officers also questioned her.

In January, after her holiday with relatives, the woman travelled back to Ashgabad airport for the return flight to Turkey. However, airport officials refused to allow her to board her flight as they said she had been banned from leaving Turkmenistan.

The official who answered the phone at the Migration Service in Ashgabad on 5 February refused to explain why individuals are banned from leaving the country to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. "Ask the embassy," he kept repeating, even though Forum 18 was asking about Turkmen citizens denied permission to leave Turkmenistan. He then put the phone down.

The authorities have long obstructed active religious believers from leaving the country.
(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Enforced beard shaving, enforced alcohol drinking

Police in Ashgabad and Lebap Region have again begun to enforce an unwritten ban on men under 40 wearing beards, two emigre Turkmen news websites noted separately. It appears Police regard young men with a beard as being radical Muslims and fear their influence on society could spread.

On 24 January, police detained a young man on the street in Ashgabad's 6th microdistrict because he had not shaved, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 25 January. Officers took him to the local police station, handed him a razor and forced him to shave.

Several other young men were detained for the same reason on the central Ashgabad street where the headquarters of the ordinary police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police are located. "My colleague spent two days there," an Ashgabad resident told Alternative Turkmenistan News. "When he came to work his boss asked him: So, you managed to get out? He replied that friends had helped him." The young man added that the police headquarters was "packed with bearded men".

Police in Lebap Region held for several days a young man with a beard regarded locally as in "Muslim" style (with the moustache shaved off), a relative told Alternative Turkmenistan News. Officers also forced the young man to drink alcohol.

Police often accompany the detention of young men with beards with bribe-seeking, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights noted. Officers demand 100 Manats (several days' average wages) from such young men, otherwise they hand out a fine. Some men may have been beaten and humiliated in detention, it added.

Traffic police are also stopping drivers with beards, one young man who had been stopped told the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. After checking his driving licence to confirm that he was under 40, the officer asked why he had a beard as it is "not allowed". The young man responded that he had never heard nor read that it was banned. The officer responded that ignorance of the law is no defence and took him to the police station.

Once there, the officer again told him that men can only grow beards when they reach the age of 40. He forced him to go to the barbers' shop next door to be shaved. "Until your beard is shaved off, you won't get your driving licence back," the duty officer told

him. After being shaved, officers gave the young man his driving licence back and released him.

Employers, both state and private, do not allow men of any age to have beards, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights added.

In 2014, Police in Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] detained one former member of a Muslim group led by Bahram Saparov even though he had – apparently out of fear - stopped praying publicly following the mass arrests of group members, including Saparov, the previous year. Officers shaved off his beard and forced him to eat pork and drink alcohol, both unacceptable for Muslims. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2218)

Police in the northern Dashoguz Region detained young men with beards in summer 2016 and forced them to shave, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service reported at the time. Police forced one of those detained to drink alcohol and eat pork. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey
(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments
(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan (<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>)

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY