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TURKMENISTAN: Six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed for their faith

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Six Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison for their faith, Forum 18 News Service has confirmed. These are the only known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan, as against other kinds of prisoners of conscience. Forum 18 has also heard reliable reports of several Imams being held in internal exile. Five prisoners are being held for refusing compulsory military service (Turkmenistan has no alternative service provision), while the sixth - Kurban Zakirov, the longest-serving prisoner for his beliefs – has from 2000 been serving an eight year sentence. At least one prisoner has been raped homosexually, Forum 18 has learnt, and all the others have been threatened with this. Like all non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities, Forum 18 knows of Jehovah's Witnesses being subject to harsh persecution, being regularly fined for meeting in private flats, and a family having its flat confiscated. Some have lost their jobs when their faith became known.

The release of conscientious objector Nikolai Shelekhov from labour camp on 2 January leaves six Jehovah's Witnesses currently serving prison sentences for their faith, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Five are being held for refusing compulsory military service (Turkmenistan has no provision for alternative service), while the sixth - Kurban Zakirov, Turkmenistan's longest-serving religious prisoner – is serving an eight year sentence on trumped-up assault charges. Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 that Zakirov is currently confined to a maximum-security prison in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (Türkmenbashi) (formerly Krasnovodsk), where his health continues to deteriorate.

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The 23-year-old Zakirov was originally arrested in April 1999 for refusing military service and sentenced the following month to one year's imprisonment, but was given an extra eight-year sentence in spring 2000 accused of assaulting a prison guard.

The latest of the five conscientious objectors was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on 4 December last year. He was transferred to the labour camp in the town of Seydi in eastern Turkmenistan, where the four other conscientious objector prisoners – each serving one-and-a-half year sentences - are being held. Jehovah's Witness sources report that their prisoners in this camp are regularly beaten in attempts to force them to give the compulsory state oath to President Niyazov. Jehovah's Witness leaders are not releasing the names or home towns of the five prisoners for fear of making their situation worse.

One Jehovah's Witness official told Forum 18 last November that at least one of their conscientious objectors (whom they did not identify) has been subjected to homosexual rape in prison in the past few years and all others have been threatened with the same fate (see F18News 24 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=194).

Shelekhov was released after serving his full sentence, his second for refusing military service on grounds of conscience. Forum 18 has learnt that he has returned home to the capital Ashgabad and is now preparing for his marriage. Sentenced in July 2002 to one and a half years in prison, Shelekhov was being held in a labour camp in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou (Chärjew)).

Like all non-Sunni Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities, Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied state registration. Under Turkmenistan's harsh new religion law adopted last November, all their religious activity is therefore illegal and subject to criminal penalties. Building or opening Kingdom Halls is impossible. Jehovah's Witnesses are regularly fined for meeting in private flats, while at least one family has had its flat confiscated in reprisal for hosting such meetings. Others have lost their jobs when their faith became known.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and 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>

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