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TURKMENISTAN: Raids, fines for religious meetings

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police in Dashoguz raided two Protestant home meetings in February. During one raid, officers threatened to take away the host's grandchildren and have other participants sacked from work. The host was fined nearly a week's average wage. Another home owner in Lebap Region was similarly fined for hosting a Christmas celebration. Officials in Lebap Region banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques.

Police raids have continued on religious believers meeting in homes. Officers in February raided two homes in the northern Dashoguz Region where Protestants were meeting. After the first raid a court fined the home owner nearly a week's average wage. Participants in the second meeting are expecting to be summoned to court to be fined.

During the first Dashoguz Region raid, officials threatened that they would take away the home owner's grandchildren, Protestants complained to Forum 18. They also made threats to others, including about possible sackings from work (see below).

The homeowner in the eastern Lebap Region who hosted a Christmas celebration in December 2019 was fined nearly a week's average wage in late January. During the raid, officers searched the home, seized telephones and then questioned the participants at the police station. Officers later summoned participants one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints (see below).

In the southern Ahal Region, the region around the capital Ashgabat, police raided a group of Protestants meeting in a home in late 2019. Officers threatened participants not to meet. "They're used to this," one local Protestant told Forum 18. "They periodically get such visits or phone calls" (see below).

In the eastern Lebap Region, officials in February banned state employees – including those working in education, culture, health, the military and the police – from attending Friday prayers in mosques. They warned that if they were seen in mosques they would be sacked from their jobs. Officials also banned them from praying the namaz at their place of work (see below).

Meanwhile, the Customs Service in the capital Ashgabat in 2019 refused to hand over a parcel of Christian books sent to an individual from Germany. Officials told the Protestant "receiving these books is banned", but gave no explanation for the ban (see below).

The telephones of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev and the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 19 March.

Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief

Turkmenistan imposes tight state controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). Only approved activity in approved locations by approved religious communities is allowed. Unregistered religious activity is banned and punishable.

All religious literature is under tight state control and unapproved distribution of such literature is punishable. Sharing of faith is banned and punishable.

The regime arbitrarily denies registration to communities it does not like. Only mosques subject to the state-controlled Muftiate (led by Chief Mufti Yalkab Hojagulyyev) are allowed to exist. Only a small number of non-Muslim communities are allowed to register, while many (particularly Protestant communities outside the capital Ashgabat, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses) have had registration applications rejected.

Many of the small number of religious communities the regime had earlier allowed to register now live in legal uncertainty. The amendments to the Religion Law which came into force in April 2016 mandated re-registration

(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2323). The Justice Ministry is believed to have re-registered Mosques of the state-backed Muslim Board soon after. The Justice Ministry re-registered the 12 Russian Orthodox parishes in 2017, a priest told Forum 18 from Ashgabat. Two Pentecostal communities also gained re-registration.

However, a number of non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious communities complained to Forum 18 in March 2020 that the Justice Ministry has still not granted re-registration. Officials treat their previous state registration as no longer valid. This leads to fear that any of their public worship could lead to punishment.

Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone in the Justice Ministry in Ashgabat on 19 March to find out why not all communities that sought the mandatory re-registration in 2016 and 2017 have been able to receive it.

Jehovah's Witnesses say that since September 2018, government interference with their religious activity has increased. They complain of police harassment and threats, police interference with the public manifestation of belief, government denial of the right to possess religious material and government denial of registration. They also complain that the international Jehovah's Witness website, www.jw.org, is blocked in Turkmenistan.

Fined for hosting Christmas celebration

On 30 January, a court in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region fined a home owner 200 Manats in punishment for hosting a gathering on 26 December 2019 to celebrate Christmas, Protestants told Forum 18. The fine represents nearly a week's average wages for those in formal work. The home owner's computer was also ordered confiscated.

The court is believed to have fined the home owner under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"). In recent years, members of a variety of religious communities have been fined under Article 76. Most of the 8 Jehovah's Witnesses known to have been fined in 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534) were punished under this Article.

Administrative Code Article 76, 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" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2320) 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 three days' average wage for those in formal work. However, for pensioners or others without a formal job, fines can represent a severe burden.

During the raid on the 26 December 2019 Christmas gathering of Protestant women, officers searched the home, seized telephones and questioned the women at the police station. In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534)

First February Dashoguz raid

In early February, police, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers and local administration officials raided a home in the northern city of Dashoguz, where local Christians were meeting. They forced all those present, including the home owner, to go to the police station. There officers recorded their names and photographed them "as a reminder".

Officials also threatened that they would take away the home owner's grandchildren. They also made threats to others, including about possible sackings from work.

Several days later, a local court fined the home owner 200 Manats, nearly a week's average wage. The court is believed to have handed down the fine under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law").

Second February Dashoguz raid

Also in Dashoguz, on the morning of 29 February police raided a group of Protestants who were attending a house-warming celebration. "Officers barged their way into the house and started driving them outside, filming them and threatening them to make them go outside and go to the police station," a local Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Some older women refused to go to the police station, while one woman who has disabilities and cannot move unaided continued to lie on the floor.

At the police station, an MSS secret police officer – who did not give his name – read out a statement on various religious and that the group had violated the law banning religious meetings in homes. He showed three leaflets with prayers that officers had seized from some of those present, together with notebooks.

Officers pressured the detainees to write statements that they had attended an illegal religious meeting. Officers released some of the detainees after about four hours, holding some of them till later.

At least some of those present are expecting to be summoned to court, where they expect to be fined, possibly under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"). No trial had taken place by 19 March.

Ahal Region raid

In late 2019, police raided a Protestant meeting for worship in a home in a town in Ahal Region, the region surrounding the capital Ashgabat. Officers threatened those present and told them not to meet for religious purposes. No one was brought to trial or fined.

"They're used to this," one local Protestant told Forum 18. "They periodically get such visits or phone calls." The Protestant added that no raids have taken place on the group so far in 2020.

State employees banned from attending mosque prayers

Officials in Lebap Region in February banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques.

"Workers in the spheres of education, culture and health, as well as military and police officers throughout the Region were ordered not to attend Friday prayers and not to perform the namaz at their places of work," a local correspondent told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service from Lebap Region on 24 February. "They were warned that if they are seen in mosques, they will be sacked from their jobs. But a few state employees, despite the fear of losing their jobs, still go to mosques."

Heads of state agencies warned their employees of the ban, but did not explain the reasons for it, the correspondent added. "I have not yet heard that measures have been taken against anyone for visiting mosques. But according to several state employees, state security officers who conduct surveillance on mosques are at the moment limiting themselves to warnings."

The ban on state officials attending Friday prayers in mosques came as President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov attended the opening of a new government-sponsored mosque on 21 February in Lebap's regional capital Turkmenabat. Accompanying the President at the high-profile event were all six of the government-approved regional imams.

In his remarks at the mosque, the President claimed that "the government secures all the necessary conditions to protect freedom of conscience", the government website noted the same day.

Local elders who were due to meet the President at the mosque were forced to rehearse from 14 February for the following week, at times for many hours on the same day, the emigre news website Chronicles of Turkmenistan noted on 22 February. One elder, who suffered from diabetes, collapsed during one long evening rehearsal. Police bundled him out of the mosque and only there did they allow him medical attention.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why officials banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques in Lebap Region. The man who answered the phone at the regional administration's Religious Affairs Department put the phone down on 19 March as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service was similarly unable to get comment in February from the administration of Lebap Region or the MSS secret police in Turkmenabat.

Customs refuse to hand over Christian books

Friends from Germany sent a parcel of Christian books to a Protestant in Turkmenistan in 2019. However, when the individual went to the Customs Service in the capital Ashgabat to collect the books, customs officials told the Protestant "receiving these books is banned", local Protestants complained to Forum 18. Customs officials gave no explanation for the ban.

Officials also often seize religious literature and objects from individuals returning to Turkmenistan from abroad. In December 2018, security personnel at Ashgabat 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. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2449)

In addition, police often seize religious literature they find when raiding individuals' homes or detaining individuals on the street (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534). (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 and belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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