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TURKMENISTAN: Why register when persecution continues?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Despite gaining state registration under the much-trumpeted "liberalisation" of the religion law, secret police raids and threats against a Baptist congregation in Turkmenistan have not stopped, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Last Wednesday (4 August), NSM secret police raided a meeting for prayer and bible study, arrested participants for three hours, confiscated bibles and hymn books, and threatened a "big problem" if meetings continued. Another state registered community, the Hare Krishnas, have been told by state officials that they do not know whether the community should be allowed to operate. A wide range of religious communities have either been unsuccessful with registration applications, or do not want to apply because of the harsh controls they would be subjected to. Asked about making a registration application, one Jehovah's Witness said to Forum 18 "Why should we when persecution continues?"

State registration as a religious community has not halted secret police raids on and threats against a Baptist congregation. On the evening of 4 August, six National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police officers raided a private flat in the town of Abadan (formerly Bezmein), near the capital Ashgabad, where a small group of Baptists were meeting to pray and read the Bible, reliable Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. After holding them for three hours and confiscating their Bibles and hymnbooks, the secret police threatened that any attempt to meet again in Abadan would cause a "big problem" for Pastor Vasili Korobov and other local Baptists.

The meeting, led by Pastor Korobov from Ashgabad, had only just begun at 9 pm when six NSM secret policemen raided the apartment owned by Irina Nazarova. The Baptists reported that they were initially "very aggressive", ordering Pastor Korobov and the group not to undertake any religious activities in the town. Pastor Korobov pointed out that the Baptists have received state registration from the Justice Ministry (certificate number 0012, date of registration 25 June 2004), and told the secret police that he could show them the registration documents the following day. However, contradicting public official statements, secret police officers Saparov and Ishanov (first names unknown) both said that, even if religious communities have registration, they still need 500 members to be able to meet.

The secret police officers held the whole group until just after midnight and confiscated all Bibles and hymnbooks. The Baptists reported that Pastor Korobov told one secret police officer that he should not confiscate the books, to no effect.

Abadan is a particular religious freedom blackspot, with local police in June repeatedly warning Svetlana Gurkina, a member of a different Baptist church in the town, that she would be imprisoned and her flat confiscated if she continued to host religious meetings (see F18News 1 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=353). She was also told by the town's deputy police chief that "in Turkmenistan only two faiths are allowed, Islam and Orthodoxy, while the rest are banned." A group of non-denominational Christians were fined there in June 2003, chief mufti Kakageldy Vepaev taking part in at least four secret police raids (see F18News 3 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=71 and 6 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=74).

Under the much-trumpeted "liberalisation" of the harsh law on religion earlier this year, which reduced the theoretical threshold for religious communities to gain registration from 500 adult citizens to five, only the Baptists, the Adventists, the Hare Krishna community and the Baha'is have been able to gain registration (see F18News 3 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=333). Registration fees are high by Turkmen standards: the Hare Krishna community had to pay 2,500,000 manats (roughly 100 US dollars [679 Norwegian Kroner, or 82 Euros] at the black market exchange rate). Average salaries are roughly 1/3rd of this amount. Contrary to international human rights agreements, unregistered religious activity remains illegal and punishable by fines.

A wide range of religious communities would like state registration, in order to try to function legally in the eyes of the government – including the Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Armenian Apostolic Church, Pentecostals, New Apostolic Church and Shia Muslims. But all have either been unsuccessful with their registration applications, or have declined to apply as they are unhappy with the harsh controls they would be subjected to. (See F18News 28 June

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=350 and 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=320).

A Jehovah's Witness elder from Ashgabad, asked by Forum 18 on 2 August about his community applying for registration, said "Why should we when persecution continues? They asked for lists of all our members – they'll just summon them one by one. Why should we register and go through all this persecution? We're not criminals." He said that Jehovah's Witness congregations cannot meet, as "the police have warned those who were fined earlier for hosting meetings not to allow more than three believers to meet together."

Although fines for religious activity seem to have eased in recent months, life for religious communities is still difficult. "Our church is in a desperate situation," one Protestant pastor who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 from the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk) on 14 July. "The authorities have more than once and very brutally resisted our earnest desire to meet and preach the Gospel among the population. Our brothers and sisters have repeatedly been interrogated and threatened by the secret police, while many brothers and sisters have been kicked out of their jobs for their faith."

Other religious communities, as well as the Baptists, who have been able to gain registration have also suffered difficulties. One Hare Krishna told Forum 18 that although the community now has state registration, state officials do not know whether the community should be allowed to operate. The Hare Krishnas have not yet been able to hold open, public religious meetings, and are still being forced to meet privately in homes.

There also seems to be no change in the government's strongly expressed hostility to any form of religious freedom. The exiled Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported on 5 August that, last week, officials of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs visited the administrations in all the velayats (regions) of the country to meet state-approved religious activists, heads of ideological organisations, and elders to warn them of the threat to Islam posed by officially registered "non-traditional" religious movements. In particular, Gengeshi officials singled out the Jehovah's Witnesses, even though they do not have official registration.

According to a participant at the meeting held in the hyakimlik (town administration) of the Mary velayat, in eastern Turkmenistan, Turkmenistan's central Gengeshi deputy chairman, Murad Karriyev from the capital Ashgabad, said that representatives of other religions are far more active in public activities than followers of Islam. Karriyev complained of what he described as the greed of many imams, citing the case of an unnamed prominent imam who was visited one night by a young man who had just stolen a girl, asking the imam to conduct a religious wedding ceremony for them. The imam tried to refuse stating that it was late, but when the young man offered him money, the imam allegedly agreed. According to Karriyev, imams do not regard working with the people as a priority, unlike the leaders of the Jehovah's Witness, Baha'i and Adventist communities who regard "ideological and agitational activities" among the people as very important.

In Karriyev's emphatically expressed view, the worst aspect of this is that many Muslims are being converted to other religions, and become such devout followers of the religions they convert to that little can alter their views. In one case cited at the meeting, a previously devout Muslim became a Jehovah's Witness and is now successfully recruiting Muslims. Officials complained at the meeting that the ability of leaders of non-traditional religions to convince others is hard to surpass; they successfully did that "from the underground". With official registration, they will now be even more active, which therefore means more successful. Karriyev called on imams to be more active, and to be aware of other religions which will operate legally with state registration.

Meanwhile, intermittent protests have continued against the enforced imposition of President Saparmurat Niyazov's "spiritual writings", the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), on mosques. Vitali Ponomarev of the Moscow-based Memorial human rights group reported on 14 July that anonymous anti-government leaflets circulating in Ashgabad in early July contained calls for Muslims not to go to mosques where the Ruhnama is cited together with the Koran. Both imams and Russian Orthodox priests are compelled to make approving references to this book in sermons, and a mosque has been closed down by the NSM secret police for not putting the Ruhnama on the same reading stand as the Koran (see F18News 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187).

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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