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TURKMENISTAN: Baptists raided and Jehovah's Witnesses reject presidential portraits

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the third known set of raids on religious communities in August, police interrogated and threatened members of a Baptist church in the western town of Balkanabad, warning Nikolai Matsenko that any further unregistered services in his home will lead to fines. Meanwhile a Jehovah's Witness elder told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Ashgabad that if his faith gets registration, it will reject official demands made of other faiths to hang the country's flag and a portrait of the president where it worships. "These are unacceptable demands," he declared. Forum 18 has been unable to get confirmation of a 5 September report that President Saparmurat Niyazov ordered the registration procedure for religious organisations to be tightened up once more.

As an unconfirmed report says President Saparmurat Niyazov has ordered rules on registering religious communities to be tightened up once again, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that police launched another major crackdown on a Baptist congregation in the western town of Balkanabad (formerly Nebit-Dag) in late August, threatening church members that if they meet for worship again they will be fined. Meanwhile, a Jehovah's Witness elder has told Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabad that although his community is planning to lodge a registration application, it will not accept official demands made of other faiths to hang the country's flag in places of worship and a portrait of the president. "These are unacceptable demands," the elder, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 on 10 September. "The constitution is clear: religion and the state are separate. Plus as Jehovah's Witnesses we do not get involved in politics."

An officer of the criminal investigation department arrived at the Balkanabad home of Nikolai Matsenko in the afternoon of 20 August, Baptists in Turkmenistan told Forum 18 on 28 August. After questioning him about the church's activity, the officer warned him that if any further services take place in his flat he will be fined. Later that evening, another police officer arrived at Matsenko's home, presenting himself as the new local policeman and declaring that he had come to get to know him.

At 11 pm the following evening, a group of people knocked on Matsenko's door. One of them introduced himself as the local policeman (although this was not the same man as the officer who had arrived the previous day). "They insistently demanded that he open the door and let them into the flat," the Baptists told Forum 18. "But as it was night, brother Nikolai didn't open the door. Threatening dire consequences, they left."

The Baptists reported that police visited several other church members in the town, including new converts, at the end of August. One young man was forcibly dragged from his home to the police station. "All were asked exactly the same questions about the internal life of the church," the Baptists complained.

The Balkanabad Baptist congregation belongs to a Baptist network of churches that refuse to register on principle in any of the former Soviet republics where they operate, regarding such registration as unacceptable state interference. Matsenko was among a large group of church members in Balkanabad given heavy fines at the beginning of the year for participation in the church (see F18News 9 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=225).

August saw several other raids on religious communities. The secret police raided a Baptist home on 4 August in Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near Ashgabad, where a prayer and Bible reading service was underway (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390). Three days later police raided the home of an Adventist family in the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Chärjew], even though no religious meeting was in progress (see F18News 11 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=392).

The Ashgabad Jehovah's Witness elder told Forum 18 that their communities still cannot meet in large numbers. "Everything is continuing as before," he declared. "We can only meet in small groups, maybe five or at most six people." He confirmed that the two Jehovah's Witness prisoners, Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov, both arrested in May and sentenced to a year and a half in prison, have not been freed (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349).

There appears to have been little progress on registering religious communities. So far this year, only the Adventists, one group of

Baptists, the Baha'is and the Hare Krishna community are known to have received registration. Many others who have applied or sought information on how to apply languish without registration. As Turkmenistan's religious law specifically prohibits unregistered religious activity, failure to gain registration can have serious consequences.

The exiled human rights group the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported on 7 September that some ethnic Kurds – about 6,000 of whom live mainly in Ashgabad and other southern regions of the country along the border with Iran – are unable to practice their faith freely. Most are of Sunni Muslim background, and can therefore worship in government-approved mosques. "However, there are also Shia Kurds and even Christians who often face problems regarding freedom of religion with the local special services," the group reported.

Particularly affected are Kurds who belong to the Yezidi faith, a uniquely Kurdish ancient faith. Seiran Amanov, a resident of Bikrov near Ashgabad, told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative that his religious affiliation has meant that he has been repeatedly interrogated by the secret police and has been accused of belonging to a "dangerous Islamic sect". "As Seiran states, this happens despite the fact that everybody knows two religious movements of the Kurds: Yezidism and Aliallahism."

The Jehovah's Witnesses and Yezidis are among many faiths in Turkmenistan that do not have registration, including Pentecostals and other Evangelical Christians, Catholics, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Lutherans, Shia Muslims and Jews.

However, even registration appears to be of little help in being able to function. Adventist pastor Pavel Fedotov complained in early August that his church is unable to rent anywhere to hold services (see F18News 11 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=392). Baptist and Hare Krishna leaders have made similar complaints to Forum 18 that registration has not helped their communities function openly.

One Baha'i leader in Ashgabad told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative that despite the group's new registration the authorities have made life for the community very difficult, banning it from renting places for meetings. A secret government order bans registered religious and civic groups from opening accounts at any of Ashgabad's banks, while the new registration rules require a bank account for all financial transactions, the group reported on 15 August.

A local Baha'i reported that mainly old people who have a long association with the faith keep in contact with the community. "This can partly be explained by the fact that special services have conducted meetings with many Baha'i followers and threatened them with dismissal from work," the Baha'i told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative. "So registration by itself does not guarantee that we can profess our faith openly. I think this easing of registration restrictions has merely a declaratory character."

The German-based Central Asian Press Agency reported on 5 September that President Niyazov had issued an instruction to the Adalat Ministry at a conference of law-enforcement officers that it should tighten up "the rules for registering religious sects and non-governmental organisations", as well as to work closely with the National Security Ministry "to stamp out any illegal actions". Forum 18 has been unable to confirm that Niyazov issued such an instruction from any other source.

On 10 September Forum 18 was unable to reach Maifa Sarieva, who has headed the department at the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry which registers religious communities for the past two months. No other ministry officials could tell Forum 18 whether the president had given such an order for the registration rules to be tightened up, what was holding up the registration of religious organisations and why religious communities that have registration cannot in practice function openly.

Meanwhile, the state-run media has insisted that the decision to remove from office the head of the country's largest religious group, the Sunni Muslims, came from the muftiate. Kakageldi Vepaev, who had been appointed chief mufti by President Niyazov in January 2003, was sacked on 24 August for "serious shortcomings in his work", according to the state-run media, as well as deficiencies in his private life. Appointed as his successor was 27-year-old Rovshen Allaberdiev, former chief imam of the Lebap region and former chairman of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs at the Lebap regional administration.

The previous chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, sacked by Niyazov in January 2003, remains in prison.

The Sunni Muslim community is the most tightly-controlled faith in Turkmenistan. No leaders or imams can be appointed without government approval, granted through the Gengeshi. Allaberdiev's close links with the state are clear from his previous double appointment as regional chief imam and government religious affairs official. On being sacked as chief mufti, Vepaev presumably also lost his job as one of the Gengeshi's deputy chairmen. As a Gengeshi official, he had personally taken part in raids on religious services by minority faiths.

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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