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TURKMENISTAN: Public Prosecutors assault and threaten to rape female Jehovah's Witness

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Amid a continuing crackdown on religious minorities, a female Jehovah's Witness, Gulsherin Babakulieva, has been assaulted and threatened with rape by two public prosecutors, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The second prosecutor to threaten rape also said that he would then dress Babakulieva as a suicide bomber, to frame her as a terrorist. Threats of rape have been used against another female Jehovah's Witness, and at least one male Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience has been homosexually raped. The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities continues throughout Turkmenistan.

A female Jehovah's Witness, Gulsherin Babakulieva, has been assaulted and threatened with rape amid a continuing crackdown on religious minorities in the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Chärjew], Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Late on 5 September, a deputy public prosecutor grabbed Gulsherin Babakulieva, a Jehovah's Witness who had been detained earlier in the day, fondled her and threatened to rape her, Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18. "When Gulsherin tried to break free he responded by hitting her violently on the head with his palm eight times. Then he freed her and boasted that he is a Muslim and is not used to seeing women refuse him and that he likes to have sex with any women whether they want it or not."

An assistant prosecutor threatened that he too would rape her before dressing her as a shahid (suicide bomber) and accusing her of being a terrorist. A duty police officer saved Babakulieva from being taken away in the assistant prosecutor's car.

Reached at his office in Turkmenabad on 15 October, Bairam Agaev, the city's senior public prosecutor, told Forum 18 he had never heard of Gulsherin Babakulieva and other Jehovah's Witnesses and denied that anyone had threatened rape against any women under investigation. Reached the same day, Uzak Bainazarov, the regional deputy prosecutor, sounded very drunk. He denied to Forum 18 that any Jehovah's Witnesses had been held and put the phone down.

Babakulieva was arrested by a National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police officer, together with fellow Jehovah's Witness Gulkamar Jumayeva, as they were discussing their faith with others. The NSM called the local police officer Sakhatov and about noon the two women were taken to the police station of the city's Gagarin district. Jehovah's Witnesses state that "by use of threats, shouting and humiliation they were forced to give written statements." At 3 pm they were transferred to the city's second police station and required to present their identity documents. It was at 11 pm that Babakulieva was ordered to go to the office of the deputy prosecutor, who was drunk, and it was in his office that he threatened her with rape.

The Jehovah's Witnesses report that while one duty police officer protected Babakulieva, another who was present in the room when the rape threats were made did nothing to protect her, continuing to play a card game on the office computer.

At midnight the harassment stopped and Babakulieva and Jumayeva were allowed to try to sleep on some chairs in the police station. The following morning they were taken to the local khyakimlik (administration), where police officer Sakhatov ordered them to reappear at the khyakimlik at 7 am the following day before allowing them to go home. During their 24-hour detention they were given no food, could go to the toilet only under escort and were not allowed to phone home. Jumayeva was especially concerned about her three children, who were home on their own without knowing where their mother had been taken.

Earlier this year, at least one male Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience has been homosexually raped (see F18News 10 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=315) and a female Jehovah's Witness in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] was taken to a police station, had her Bible and other literature confiscated and also threatened with rape (see F18News 1 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=293).

Police in Turkmenabad have also raided an Adventist family's children's party, on the pretext that watching a video of the film 'Finding Nemo' constituted an "illegal" religious service (see F18News 11 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=392). Other attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenabad have also taken place. Two men in civilian clothes and a senior police officer, who did not identify themselves, came to the flat of Adalat Charyieva in August, asking her: "Since you are Turkmen, why do you need this religion?" Forum 18 was told that they interrogated her harshly

and demanded that she hand over her Bible and other religious literature, threatening her with deportation "to where Christians are living", before ordering her to appear at the city's second police station with her identity documents, but she refused to go.

On 16 August the same three officials also visited the home of another woman who had become interested in the Jehovah's Witness faith. She was threatened and forced to sign a statement to say that if she continued to study the Bible with the Jehovah's Witnesses she would be dismissed from her job. Again the three men did not identify themselves.

Elsewhere in the country, pressure against Jehovah's Witnesses continues. On 6 September, local police raided the home of Rodion Rogov in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk), seizing his personal Bible and copies of other Jehovah's Witness publications. Although the police promised to return the publications within two days, when they came back five days later and confiscated another Bible from Rogov, ordering him to then come to the khyakimlik. When Rogov went on 12 September, he was subjected to further pressure and his literature was not returned.

Near the capital Ashgabad on 9 September, two Jehovah's Witnesses, 70-year-old Suren Gasparyan and Smbat Safaryan, were discussing their faith with others when they were arrested by an officer of the NSM secret police's 6th department, which investigates terrorism and organised crime. When the NSM found that they were from Ashgabad, they were transferred to the 6th department in the capital and "as usual they were put under crude pressure," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "They were verbally abused, yelled at and humiliated." One officer reportedly fired his gun at a door, apparently in a bid to frighten them. After being forced to write statements, Safaryan and Gasparyan were freed in the early afternoon, though were told to return the next day with photographs of themselves.

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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