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TURKMENISTAN: Prisoners still held, one prisoner tortured with mind-altering drugs?

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Despite president Saparmurat Niyazov's proclaimed amnesty, the former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, is still in jail, along with two Jehovah's Witnesses. Religious minority prisoners of conscience, who have included Baptists and other Jehovah's Witnesses, have not been released under presidential amnesties, as released prisoners are required to swear an oath on the Koran in a mosque and a national oath of allegiance, which religious minorities consider blasphemous, may also be insisted upon. The former chief mufti is the religious prisoner of conscience serving the longest sentence in any formerly Soviet country. Fears continue to be expressed for the religious prisoners of conscience, as there is some evidence that Jehovah's Witness Kurban Zakirov, like former Baptist prisoner Shagildy Atakov, was forcibly injected with psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs.

Uzbekistan's former chief mufti Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf, regarded as one of the most authoritative and influential Muslim theologians of Central Asia, says he hopes, "Inshallah", that Turkmenistan's former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah will be freed in the current prisoner amnesty coinciding with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Nasrullah, who is from Turkmenistan's ethnic Uzbek minority, fell out of favour with Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov and was ousted from office in January 2003 and later imprisoned. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 20 October, Muhamad Yusuf described the 22-year sentence imposed on Nasrullah as "an extraordinary injustice". "I believe Nasrullah's only 'crime' was being an ethnic Uzbek." Turkmen officials have repeatedly refused to give details of the charges under which Nasrullah is held (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349).

A Jehovah's Witness leader from the capital Ashgabad, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 on 25 October that their two prisoners are still being held and there is no information on whether they will be freed (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349).

Prisoner amnesty for some

Muhamad Yusuf's comments came as President Niyazov signed an order on 23 October freeing 9,000 prisoners under the amnesty, which marks the Muslim Night of Omnipotence. The prisoners, whose names will be published in national newspapers, are due to be freed by the feast of Id al-fitr on 9 November. Religious minority prisoners have not benefited under previous amnesties, as they refuse to confess their guilt and swear the national oath of allegiance to the president and country on a copy of the Koran in the local mosque. Currently, two Jehovah's Witnesses are the only other religious prisoners of conscience held, and Baptists have in the past also been imprisoned for their beliefs.

The national oath of allegiance reads: "Turkmenistan, beloved homeland, my native land, both in my thoughts and in my heart I am eternally with you. For the slightest evil caused to you, let my hand be cut off. For the slightest calumny against you, may my tongue lose its strength. In the moment of treachery to the fatherland, to the president, to your holy banner, let my breathing cease."

"The convict making the oath puts his hands on the Koran and on bread with salt wrapped up in a cloth," the Jehovah's Witnesses report of the ceremony amnestied prisoners perform. "He solemnly admits his 'mistakes' and promises not to repeat them anymore. He attributes his release to the mercy of the President, and if desired the first [national allegiance] oath may be read."

Former chief mufti's case

Nasrullah is the religious prisoner serving the longest sentence in all the former Soviet republics. Although he was sentenced at a closed hearing by a court in Ashgabad on 2 March, the authorities have refused to give any details about the crimes they allege he committed and which articles of the criminal code he was sentenced under or to release the text of the verdict. Nasrullah, who will be 57 on 10 December, was reportedly severely beaten in prison in May in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk) (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349).

Forum 18's attempts to find out from Turkmenistan's current chief mufti Rovshen Allaberdiyev whether Nasrullah is included in the

current amnesty were unsuccessful - his telephone went unanswered on 21 October. When Forum 18 called other telephone numbers in the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, officials immediately hung up.

Muhamad Yusuf said he was sure that Nasrullah did not break the law. "We studied together at the Mir Arab medresseh in Bukhara, and even then he never participated in conversations in which there was even the slightest criticism of the authorities," he told Forum 18. "He is a very cautious man, who keeps away from politics. It is indicative that the court case against Nasrullah was kept short and closed to the public."

Muhamad Yusuf led Uzbekistan's muftiate until 1993, when he was ousted and fled abroad. He returned to Uzbekistan only in 2000.

Asked by Forum 18 whether the Uzbek muftiate or the Uzbek government had protested to the Turkmen authorities about Nasrullah's imprisonment, Muhamad Yusuf responded: "No, they are keeping quiet." He added that he knew nothing of the reaction of the Muslim clergy or ordinary believers in Uzbekistan to Nasrullah's imprisonment. Abdurazak Yunusov, an advisor to Uzbekistan's current chief mufti, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 22 October that he did not even know that Nasrullah had been arrested.

Other prisoners of conscience

The Jehovah's Witness elder told Forum 18 that their two prisoners - Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov – are still being held in labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi. Both were 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). The Jehovah's Witness said that although life in camp had been difficult for them at first, "life has now improved".

Prisoners tortured with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs?

Among religious prisoners denied release under the Ramadan prisoner amnesty in recent years was Jehovah's Witness Kurban Zakirov, who was among a group of Jehovah's Witnesses finally released on 12 June (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349). The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that although Zakirov survived imprisonment physically, "his mental and emotional wellbeing has been ruined and his personality distorted".

"There are valid indications that while in prison he was forcibly administered some sort of psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs. His arms are covered all over by injection marks and his behaviour has become odd. They say that after his release he was placed in a mental hospital but currently he is at home. " Former Baptist prisoner Shagildy Atakov, released in January 2002, is also believed to have been tortured with psychotropic drugs. Doctors examining Zakirov after his release confirmed that he had been injected and "this was obviously not done for medical reasons." The Jehovah's Witnesses add that at one time Zakirov was classified as an "enemy of the people" and his portrait was publicly displayed in the prison as if he were an especially dangerous person. (END)

For more background, see the current Forum 18 religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=32>.

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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