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TURKMENISTAN: Continued isolation of religious believers

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Turkmenistan has, as part of an apparent policy of keeping religious believers isolated, denied permission for a group of Seventh Day Adventists to visit the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, despite the fact that their invitation came from Turkmenistan's registered Adventist church. Other religious communities facing obstacles in visiting co-religionists include Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, ethnic Uzbek Muslims, and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The head of Uzbekistan's Bible Society has also been denied entry, as was the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. The only religious community to have unimpeded travel to Turkmenistan is the Russian Orthodox Church.

Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry has refused permission for a group of five leading Seventh Day Adventists to visit the country in December, despite the fact that their invitation came from Turkmenistan's registered Adventist church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The group had intended to meet officially with the staff of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad and to familiarise themselves with the work of the Church in the country, which received registration again in June after a seven and a half year break. Also barred from visiting Turkmenistan is the head of the Bible Society from neighbouring Uzbekistan, whose fourth successive application was rejected in mid-September. Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have had many visa denials over the past few years.

Officials at Turkmenistan's foreign ministry have declined to explain why foreign religious representatives are being denied visas. Reached by telephone on 25 October, one official even told Forum 18 that the number of the ministry press office is a secret and that he had no right to give it out. Agdylek Jumaniyazova, third secretary in the ministry's consular section, told Forum 18 from Ashgabad the same day that she had "no right to comment on visa refusals". Asked whether it is harder for religious figures to get visas than it is for other individuals, she said she did not know.

The Adventists launched the application process at the beginning of August for the five hoped-for visitors – Rubin Ott, head of the Church in Central Asia, and his wife, Viktor Vitko and Valeri Ivanov from Moscow, and John Graz, the Washington-based general secretary of the International Religious Liberty Association. Although all the required documents were presented, when church members went to the reception desk at the foreign ministry in mid-September to collect the permissions they were told verbally that this had not been granted. "No explanation was given," Adventist sources told Forum 18.

"This means that although we are registered as a religious organisation and our statute specifically allows us to invite foreign visitors, we don't have the right to invite people in practice," Adventists in Turkmenistan told Forum 18. "We are upset, as registration means nothing." They point out that their congregations in Turkmenistan are part of a worldwide Church and it is "only natural" that leaders and fellow Church members should visit and learn about Church life in the country.

Adventists have also been denied permission to worship, despite the much-trumpeted "liberalisation" of Turkmenistan's religious policy (see F18News 4 October 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=424).

Local Adventists also asked the Gengeshi about how they should go about the invitations. One of the deputy chairmen, Murad Karriyev, told them that they need permission from the Gengeshi and instructed them to request such permission in writing. "We wrote and got no reply," Adventists told Forum 18. "Karriyev told them that permission could take six months to come through as it was not he who decided."

Turkmenistan's Adventist church does not know whether it will ever be able to invite fellow-Adventists from abroad. "We have the foreign ministry on one side insisting that it is their decision, while on the other the Gengeshi insists they decide. But neither gives permission."

The head of the Uzbek Bible Society, Sergei Mitin, told Forum 18 in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 15 October that the rejection of his visa application was the fourth since 2000 and, as on the previous occasions, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry gave him no reason for the refusal.

He said that on each occasion he had arranged an invitation as a private individual through a commercial tourist company, but had indicated on the application form his job as head of the Bible Society. He said one of his main aims was to meet officials of the Gengeshi in Ashgabad to discuss the return of 1,500 booklets belonging to the Uzbek Bible Society confiscated by the Turkmen authorities in 1999.

The Turkmen Foreign Ministry has also denied visas to Hare Krishna followers and Jehovah's Witnesses from other Central Asian republics, Anatoli Melnik, leader of the ruling council of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, and Andrei Gorkovy (Achuta garaji-das) of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 21 October.

Both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Krishna devotees tried to obtain Turkmen visas as private individuals because their religious communities were unregistered in Turkmenistan and therefore could not send them an invitation. Given the lack of success of Turkmenistan's Adventist church in inviting foreign leaders, it seems unlikely that even with the registration it gained earlier this year that the Hare Krishna community will be successful in inviting devotees from abroad.

Foreign religious representatives occasionally manage to obtain a Turkmen visa in spite of this, but only if the Turkmen authorities fail to establish that the foreigner is coming to make contact with fellow-believers. Uzbek Krishna devotee Aleksandr Prinkur lived and preached in Turkmenistan for several years in the 1990s before being deported and his name is well known to the Turkmen special services. But his two recent applications for a Turkmen visa have been refused. After returning from visits to Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witness Anatoli Melnik gave several interviews to journalists about the infringement of Jehovah's Witnesses' rights in the country. He was refused a visa last year, as was Fedor Jitnikov, another leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan.

Interestingly, Uzbek Muslims have no contact with their fellow-believers in Turkmenistan. Abdurazak Yunusov, an adviser to Uzbekistan's chief mufti, told Forum 18 on 22 October in Tashkent that contact with Turkmen Muslims ceased when Turkmenistan became independent, although Turkmenistan has a large ethnic Uzbek minority which traditionally had close links with Uzbekistan. "No-one invites us there, so we do not apply for Turkmen visas," Yunusov declared. "Why should we go there if no-one is expecting us?" The Turkmen authorities have been placing obstacles in the way of such contacts (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=268).

It is notable that no foreign Islamic religious dignitaries attended the opening of the largest mosque in Central Asia on 22 October, an enormous personal project of President Saparmurat Niyazov in his home village, which can accommodate 10,000 worshippers. Niyazov was reported by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty as saying then that "We keep religion pure and we will not use it for political purposes, nor will we allow anyone else to use religion for their personal ambition."

Although it does not have registration in Turkmenistan, the Armenian Apostolic Church was occasionally able to send one of its priests, Fr Vram Ghazarian, who is based in the Uzbek city of Samarkand. However on his last visit in December 1999, at the invitation of the Armenian embassy in Ashgabad, he held services only on Armenian diplomatic territory. Forum 18 was unable to reach Fr Ghazarian on 21 and 22 October to find out if he has tried to visit Turkmenistan more recently.

The only faith whose representatives travel unimpeded to Turkmenistan to meet fellow believers is the Russian Orthodox Church, which has always had registration in Turkmenistan. "The bishop of the Central Asia diocese and accompanying members of his delegation travel to Turkmenistan whenever necessary," Fr Nikolai Rybchinsky, archpriest for the Central Asian diocese, told Forum 18 on 21 October in Tashkent. "Such visits take place at least once a year, and sometimes more often. We have no difficulty in obtaining Turkmen visas."

Even United Nations (UN) officials have been denied entry to the country. The previous UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Abdelfattah Amor applied to visit Turkmenistan in 2003, but the government failed to respond with an invitation, as the current rapporteur Asma Jahangir noted in her report to the UN General Assembly on 16 September 2004.

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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