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TURKMENISTAN: Adventists seek end to Sabbath schooling threats

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Leading Adventist Olga Kholopova was summoned by the secret police in the capital Ashgabad on 8 November and, two days later, to her local police station in a bid to force her to send her son to school on Saturdays, the Adventist day of rest and worship. Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service that officers threatened not only to launch a criminal case and take her son away from her if she failed to comply, but to deprive the Adventist church of the registration it got back in June after a seven and a half year break. But Pastor Pavel Fedotov told Forum 18 he believes the threats are a misunderstanding that can be overcome. "We hope for a good resolution to this issue and are looking forward to reaching an understanding with the government."

Turkmenistan's Adventist leaders are convinced that threats to their official registration as a religious organisation are a misunderstanding that can be overcome. "We're worried by the threats to remove our registration connected with our members' desire for their children not to have to study in school on Saturdays, our Sabbath," Pastor Pavel Fedotov told Forum 18 News Service on 9 November. "We hope for a good resolution to this issue and are looking forward to reaching an understanding with the government."

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that existing concerns were heightened when a leading Adventist in the capital Ashgabad, Olga Kholopova, was summoned by the National Security Ministry secret police on 8 November and threatened that if she continues to refuse to send her 12-year-old son Timur to school on Saturdays the church's registration will be removed.

"Kholopova was summoned by the ministry's 6th department, which deals with the struggle against terrorism," one Protestant told Forum 18. "Although officers were polite, she was threatened with a criminal case, a fine and the denial of parental rights if she refuses to send her child to school on Saturdays. They also threatened to send her son to a special centre for delinquent adolescents supervised by the police - and to strip the church of its legal status." The Protestant told Forum 18 that officers dismissed Kholopova's attempts to explain the importance to Adventists of observing the Sabbath.

"This is also a religious freedom issue for Timur, because he is himself a believer," one Protestant told Forum 18.

Protestant sources stressed to Forum 18 that Timur has had "excellent reports" in school and has not encountered problems with his study. They add that the secret police know that Adventists, a small minority in Turkmenistan, honour Saturday, their Sabbath, as a day of rest and worship. The Protestant sources point out that although the Turkmen school week runs from Monday to Saturday, about half the school children in Ashgabad fail to turn up on Saturdays because they are helping their families at work in markets and elsewhere.

Forum 18 was unable to immediately reach any security ministry officials to find out why such threats have been made against Kholopova and against the church. Telephones also went unanswered at the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad on 10 November.

Kholopova had already been summoned by her son's school, the local hyakimlik (administration) and her local police station in a bid to pressure her to submit. Protestant sources told Forum 18 on 10 November that she was again summoned to the local police that day, though the police told her they were surprised that they had been dragged into the issue which they said was not a police matter.

Given that unregistered religious activity in Turkmenistan is illegal, Adventists are highly concerned not only by the threats to Kholopova but the threat to remove registration from the church. On 1 June the Adventists became one of the few minority religious faiths to regain registration this year after a seven and a half year period when all their activity was treated as illegal. Their church in Ashgabad was bulldozed by the authorities in November 1999. Even now they have regained registration, they still cannot meet for worship as an entire congregation in Ashgabad (see F18News 4 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=424).

Adventist children have faced intermittent problems in school over their desire not to study on their day of rest. Despite their

religious convictions, one Adventist family in Ashgabad was forced to bow to intense pressure in September not to keep their child away from school on Saturdays.

This autumn, Adventist leaders were warned that check-ups would be carried out in all Ashgabad schools on Saturdays to make sure all children – including Adventists – were present. Sources told Forum 18 that one such check-up was carried out in the capital's schools in October. The authorities also told the Adventists they would be looking through the church's membership list to help verify that all the members' children attended school on Saturdays. Pastor Fedotov was warned that if children were not attending school on Saturdays his church's registration would be cancelled.

It is unknown if any observant Jews have encountered similar problems in Turkmenistan over compulsory schooling on Saturdays. Much of Turkmenistan's small Jewish community emigrated in the decade after independence and little communal Jewish activity appears to survive.

All Turkmenistan's religious public holidays are Muslim, the traditional faith of the majority of the population.

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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