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TURKMENISTAN: More religious prisoners of conscience jailed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan has increased the number of religious prisoners of conscience it has jailed, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, by imprisoning two further Jehovah's Witnesses, Atamurat Suvkhanov and Begench Shakhmuradov, for refusing on religious grounds to serve in the armed forces. There are now five known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan, four of them Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim, the former chief mufti. In addition, some imams are believed to be in internal exile. Religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan have been harshly treated, being regularly beaten, threatened with homosexual rape, and in one case apparently treated with psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs. Suvkhanov, who is now 18, is currently being held in the women's labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi, and the whereabouts of Shakhmuradov, who is 26, are unknown. Commenting on the fact that Shakhmuradov is older than most military conscripts, Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 that "we still don't know why someone that age was called up."

Two further Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for refusing compulsory military service on religious grounds while others continue to be threatened and fined for their religious activity, Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Atamurat Suvkhanov was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment in the north-eastern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] on 17 December 2004, while Begench Shakhmuradov was sentenced in the Azatlyk district of the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] to one year's imprisonment on about 10 February. "Shakhmuradov is 26 years old – we still don't know why someone that age was called up," Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18. The new sentences bring to five the number of known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan, four of them Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim. In addition, some imams are believed to be in internal exile.

Both Suvkhanov and Shakhmuradov were sentenced under Article 219 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces. Turkmenistan offers no non-combat alternative to those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Suvkhanov, who was baptised as a Jehovah's Witness in December 2002 and is now 18, is currently being held in the women's labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi, although Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 they believe this might be a temporary measure. The whereabouts of Shakhmuradov, who was baptised in August 2003, are unknown.

The two other Jehovah's Witness prisoners, Mansur Masharipov and Vepa Tuvakov who were both from Dashoguz, were sentenced on 28 May and 3 June 2004 on the same grounds and are being held in the Seydi men's labour camp (see F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438). All these sentences were issued after the televised announcement by President Saparmurat Niyazov earlier in 2004 that all imprisoned conscientious objectors should be released.

Six Jehovah's Witness prisoners were freed last June in the wake of the president's announcement which followed international pressure on the Turkmen government. Many of them had been harshly treated, being regularly beaten and in one case apparently treated with psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs (see F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438). One earlier Jehovah's Witness prisoner had been the victim of homosexual rape and others were threatened with the same fate (see F18News 24 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=194). However, Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 that conditions for their fellow-believers still being held have improved since last summer. "We have had no recent reports of beatings or threats against them."

Also still imprisoned is the 57-year-old former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who was arrested after falling out with President Niyazov and is now serving a 22-year sentence on charges the Turkmen government refuses to make public. He has not been freed despite recent prisoner amnesties (see F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Meanwhile, the Jehovah's Witnesses report other recent harassment of their members in Turkmenistan. On 2 November 2004, the police seized Amangozel Atageldiyeva, Gulshirin Atageldiyeva, Ayjemaal Khummedova and Maysa Annagylyjova in the town of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, one of many towns renamed after the president, in the Mary region of south-eastern Turkmenistan. The four women were taken to the local administration, threatened and mocked "with the aim of forcing them to abandon their religious views", Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18. They were then freed. Two further Jehovah's Witnesses, Guncha Atageldiyeva

and Bakhar Sapayeva, were summoned for similar threats in the following days.

On 16 November 2004, a district police officer detained Maksat Khalyshev while he was in the street in an outlying suburb of Ashgabad. After finding a Bible and other religious literature on him and in the absence of a permit to live in the capital, Khalyshev was taken to the police station. After "verbal insults and humiliation" he was taken to a holding centre where he was kept for 24 hours in the open air on a cold concrete floor without any covering. The following afternoon he was driven 50 kilometres (30 miles) outside the city, made to get out of the vehicle and told to continue to the town of Dashoguz on his own, a distance of 450 kilometres (280 miles) in a straight line. He returned to his home in Ashgabad only at 11 pm.

On 26 November 2004, Murat Saryyev – who was originally from Dashoguz - was summoned to the administration of Ashgabad's Kopetdag district. He was met by a commission of nine persons in the room dedicated to the Ruhnama, a book of President Niyazov's "spiritual" writings which has taken the place of the works of Lenin as an object of official veneration. "The members of the commission humiliated him morally and threatened to confiscate his apartment and evict him to the city of Dashoguz to his relatives if he continued conducting meetings with his fellow believers in his apartment and speaking about the gospel to others," Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18.

On 10 December 2004 Darya Meshcherina, a 20-year old Jehovah's Witness in Ashgabad was detained by the police when she gave a friend she met on the street a book, My Book of Bible Stories. "At this moment two police officers took hold of her, twisted her arms and pushed her into a car and drove to the police station," Forum 18 was told. "There the content of her bag was inspected and the following items were confiscated: The Watchtower magazine, brochures, audiocassettes, photocopied sheets of paper and a medical identification document. She was forced to make a written statement."

On 20 December Ashgabad's Azatlyk district court fined Meshcherina 2,500,000 manats (3,077 Norwegian kroner, 368 Euros or 480 US dollars at the highly inflated official exchange rate) under Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes any religious activity the government has not authorised. The fine represents about 1.5 times the average monthly salary.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are among a whole range of religious communities that have failed to get registration with the government and therefore the right to conduct any religious activity. Other such faiths effectively banned include all Protestant denominations apart from the Adventists and possibly the Baptists (their registration has not yet been completed eight months after they were given their registration certificate), Shia Muslims, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Catholics (except on Vatican diplomatic territory), the Lutherans, the Jews, the Yezidis (followers of an ancient Kurdish faith) and the New Apostolic Church. Even for registered faiths (the Muslims, the Russian Orthodox, the Adventists, possibly the Baptists, the Hare Krishna community and the Baha'is), religious activity is legal only in the few authorised places of worship. (END)

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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