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TURKMENISTAN: "Same repressive measures" include bans on worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Annamurad Meredov, the religious affairs official who led a ten-strong raiding party on a Baptist service in the town of Mary on 9 June has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the service was "illegal", although the Church has registration at the national level. "The church's pastor asked them to explain the legal basis for the visit and to identify themselves, but this was ignored," local Baptists told Forum 18. "All those present were subjected to interrogation one by one and were recorded on video-camera." Meredov denied Baptist claims that he banned the church from meeting but refused to say what will happen the next time the Mary congregation meets for worship. "As before, the authorities continue to use the same methods against Christians, including recording personal details and places of work, demanding that they show their identity papers and banning them from meeting," Baptists complain.

Some ten officials raided a Baptist service being held in a private home in the south-eastern town of Mary on 9 June despite the fact that the congregation is part of the registered Baptist Church, Baptist sources told Forum 18 News Service from Turkmenistan. The raiders, led by Annamurad Meredov, head of the religious affairs department at the town administration, included police officers and officials of the public prosecutor's office and town administration. "The church's pastor asked them to explain the legal basis for the visit and to identify themselves, but this was ignored," sources told Forum 18. "All those present were subjected to interrogation one by one and were recorded on video-camera." Local Baptists believe little has changed for religious minorities, despite the Turkmen government's proclaimed liberalisation in the area of religion. "Despite assurances from Turkmenistan's authorities on freedom of conscience, pressure on religious believers in the country has not eased up," local Baptists conclude, describing the illegal breaking-up of the service as a "graphic example" of this.

During the 9 June raid, the pastor showed the Baptist Church's registration certificate issued by the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) ministry in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] – which describes the Church as working in the whole country. However, the officials dismissed this as "invalid", claiming it had no legal force in the town of Mary. They then warned church members verbally that "all forms of religious service are banned" until the church gets "extra permission" to hold services in the Mary region or individual registration of the Mary congregation. Officers drew up an official report on the violation of the law, but the Baptists present refused to sign it. Officers then pressured them to write statements about their presence at the service. "Among those present were some attending a service for the first time and pressure was put on them which will certainly impact on whether they attend in future," local Baptists told Forum 18.

Reached at the Mary administration, Meredov denied that he and the other officials had "raided" the Baptist church. "I simply got a call from the passport desk at the police station – they didn't know what sort of meeting was going on and what its purpose was, so we went round," he told Forum 18 from Mary on 10 June. "We didn't hurt them." He failed to explain why it is necessary for the authorities to know what private meetings are about. "We didn't ban them from meeting, just advised them to act in accordance with the law." He insisted that registration at national level is not enough and that the church needs registration in the town for the congregation to be able to meet.

Meredov was vague about what will happen when the church next meets for worship. "As long as they don't do anything against the law we won't interfere," he told Forum 18. But he refused to say whether meeting for worship in private will lead to punishment.

"As before, the authorities continue to use the same methods against Christians, including recording personal details and places of work, demanding that they show their identity papers and banning them from meeting," Baptists complain.

The raid on the Mary Baptist congregation and ban on any further services follows a similar raid on another Baptist congregation in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) in March. Officials claimed their service was "illegal" and five church members were given heavy fines in punishment (see F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535).

During the spring, the Hare Krishna community in Ashgabat was banned from holding further meetings, despite the fact that it likewise has registration. Officials told the community it could not meet in a house that was designated for business, not religious

purposes (see F18News 25 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=550). Religious services in private homes are banned and public bodies are reluctant to rent premises to religious communities, even if they are registered.

By contrast, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ashgabad, whose church was bulldozed by the authorities without compensation in 1999, could not meet for half a year after gaining registration again last summer, but is now allowed to rent premises regularly for worship (see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521).

In early April, shortly before the Pentecostal Church regained official registration after eight years, several Pentecostals were summoned and threatened in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=548).

In her 15 March report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (E/CN.4/2005/61/Add.1), the UN special rapporteur on religious freedom Asma Jahangir detailed the failure of the Turkmen authorities to address her numerous enquiries about violations of religious freedom in individual cases. In one letter to her of 20 December 2004, the Turkmen government complained that "sometimes some unreliable sources gave non-objective information" on individual cases, but Jahangir stressed she was still waiting for observations from the government on cases she raised. She said she is still waiting for a response to her repeated requests to visit Turkmenistan to investigate for herself the religious freedom situation on the ground.

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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