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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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TURKMENISTAN: Jehovah's Witness challenges 15 day imprisonment

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

Jehovah's Witness Konstantin Vlaskin, beaten by police and imprisoned for 15 days in July on charges of hooliganism, is challenging the basis of his conviction. "The police claim I caused a disturbance, but this is untrue," he told Forum 18 News Service from Turkmenabad. "They wanted to cover up the fact they were punishing me for my religious activity." After the prosecutor's office upheld the charge on 31 August, Vlaskin pledged to take his case higher. He has since been threatened with a fine. After bringing in a local mullah, police insulted three other Jehovah's Witnesses in the city for "abandoning their [Muslim] faith", while another was beaten and accused of being a terrorist. In Ashgabad, Dmitry Krivets' vital 10-day medical treatment at a clinic was cut short after two days after its director received a phone call that he was a "sectarian". A Jehovah's Witness pensioner was threatened with deportation to a desert region of the country. Turkmenistan's Jehovah's Witnesses have not applied for official registration, saying they are still not clear whether it would be any help in being able to practice their faith freely. Registered faiths regularly suffer raids on religious services.

Jehovah's Witness Konstantin Vlaskin is challenging the authorities' decision to imprison him in July for 15 days on hooliganism charges, insisting the accusations were fabricated. "The police claim I caused a disturbance, but this is untrue," he told Forum 18 News Service from the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) on 12 September. "In reality they simply summoned me and punished me for being a Jehovah's Witness. They wanted to cover up the fact they were punishing me for my religious activity." He rejected the assertion in a 31 August letter from the city prosecutor's office that he was guilty of hooliganism, vowing to take his case higher.

Vlaskin said he was summoned and detained on 8 July. After beating him on his kidneys and spleen, district policeman Chary Sadykov, along with another officer in civilian clothes named Batyr (last name unknown), took him to the 6th department of the police, which has responsibility for the fight against terrorism and organised crime. The following day Vlaskin was found guilty of violating Article 177 of the Code of Administrative Offences and given the 15-day prison term. "I complained to the prosecutor's office as soon as I came out of prison two weeks later," he told Forum 18, "as I didn't insult or fight anyone."

During the two weeks he was held, all access and visits were denied. Even his own sister was not allowed to see him or pass personal necessities to him. Also denied was her request to see a court decision on her brother's detention.

Vlaskin told Forum 18 that since his release in late July, he has been summoned again by the hyakimlik (city administration) and threatened. He was then yet again verbally summoned and informed he will be fined. "They didn't summon me properly in writing, so I didn't go," he told Forum 18. It remains unclear what the fine was for and how much it was.

Vlaskin's imprisonment came amid continuing pressure on other Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenabad. For a whole week, From 1 to 7 July, local resident Serdar Ovlyakuliev was repeatedly assaulted by police officer Batyr Yazkuliev who came to his home every day and beat him in front of his family and neighbours, accusing him of being a terrorist. Yazkuliev also insulted and verbally abused his whole family, while making attempts to take Ovlyakuliev to the police station.

On 7 August police in the city forced their way uninvited into a private flat where three Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered socially. They threatened the owner that all her free services, including gas and electricity, would be taken away from her and that they would drive her out of the city. "They confiscated religious literature and even invited a local mullah and insulted the three Witnesses while he was there," Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18. "They accused the three of abandoning their [Muslim] faith."

In the following days, two of those present were summoned to the local administration and the police. On 15 August one received a protocol dated 6 August in which he was fined 1.5 million manats (1,837 Norwegian kroner, 235 Euros or 288 US dollars at the grossly inflated official exchange rate) for violating Article 205 of the administrative code, which punishes unregistered religious activity. Although the man did not pay the fine, Jehovah's Witnesses report that harassment has stopped.

Vlaskin told Forum 18 that Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenabad – who do not have the compulsory official registration the

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authorities claim they require before they can meet for worship – have never been able to meet together as a community. "If we met together, we would each be given 15 days in prison," he told Forum 18. "We want registration so that we can meet together freely and express our religious views. Turkmenistan's constitution provides very good guarantees for free religious practice."

This summer also saw a crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses in Annau, a village on the outskirts of the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 that on 14 June Vladimir Klokov was summoned to the local police station, where he was beaten together with a person with whom he had been talking about his faith. On 17 June he was summoned to a commission at the local administration where he was threatened with eviction from his home and a fine if he continues to share his religious views with others.

On 17 June, Galina Shchulika, a pensioner in Annau, was summoned to a commission consisting of members of the local hyakimlik and the local office of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for religious affairs. She was threatened with a fine of 6,000,000 manats. She was also threatened that her property would be taken away from her and she would be deported to Bekdash, a desert region on the Caspian Sea about 700 km (435 miles) from Ashgabad close to the border with Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan has reintroduced the Soviet-era practice of internal deportation, often without trial.

Also in Annau, Rustam Raimov was detained for three hours on the morning of 21 June at the police 6th department. Major Nedir Sakhatov and Colonel Sapar Geldiyev along with other officers (who did not give their names) assaulted him verbally and "insulted his religious dignity", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The language used was very vulgar and offensive. Raimov was searched, his pockets were checked and personal notes were ripped out of his Bible."

Meanwhile in Ashgabad, Dmitry Krivets was discharged from a polyclinic on 16 June ahead of schedule because he is a Jehovah's Witness. Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 he was only on the second day of vital 10-day medical treatment when the director of the polyclinic received a phone call informing him that Krivets is "a sectarian". He was discharged despite the fact that his course of treatment still had eight days to run.

On 1 September in Ashgabad, officers of the police 6th department questioned another Jehovah's Witness. They accused him of having given up his "Muslim faith" and threatened that they would find evidence against him allowing them to deport him from the country, even though he is a citizen of Turkmenistan. International law does not allow governments to deport citizens from their own country for no reason.

Turkmenistan's Jehovah's Witness community has not so far applied for registration since the regulations were, in theory, eased in 2004. They say they are still not clear whether having official registration would be any help in being able to practice their faith freely.

Religious communities which have gained registration since 2004 – including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals and Hare Krishna devotees – have faced continuing harassment when they try to meet for worship, especially in towns outside Ashgabad (see F18News 18 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=632).

Strong official pressure also continues against unregistered - and de facto illegal - communities, such as those from the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries (see F18News 29 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=621).

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme

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