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TURKMENISTAN: JW held in psychiatric hospital and Baptists raided by Imam with officials

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A Jehovah's Witness, Aga Soyegov, is being held in a psychiatric hospital in Turkmenistan because of his refusal on religious grounds to undertake military service, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Two other religious prisoners – a Hare Krishna devotee and the former Chief Mufti – are also known to Forum 18. Soyegov has been diagnosed as being healthy, but is still being held in the psychiatric hospital. Raids are continuing against Baptists in Turkmenistan, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. On Saturday 17 December, a prayer meeting of a Turkmen-speaking registered Baptist church in Deynau was raided by the MSS secret police, the ordinary police, a Public Prosecutor and a local Imam. Officials then searched the house without a search warrant – which is illegal in Turkmenistan – for religious literature, as well as threatening and detaining those present. Two Christians had their personal Bibles confiscated and the church in Deynau continues to be put "under strong pressure."

A young male Jehovah's Witness from the eastern city of Mary, Aga Soyegov, is currently being held in a psychiatric hospital in the city due to his refusal on religious grounds to undertake military service, Forum 18 News Service has learnt from Jehovah's Witness sources. The last previous Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were released in April 2005. However, Forum 18 was told at that time of fears that, due to the lack of any form of alternative civilian service, young Jehovah's Witness men could be arrested at any time (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=548).

Soyegov was last month (November) called to the Military Prosecutor's Office in Mary, where he was interrogated by Deputy Prosecutor Nepes who threatened Soyegov with imprisonment. Soyegov was then held for 10 days in the Military Prosecutor's Office and again interrogated by Nepes. Durdy Yazlyyev of the 2nd 'Alp Arslan' Motor-Rifle Division threatened to send Soyegov to a psychiatric hospital, where he was eventually sent. Dr Altyn Amanova, the medical doctor in charge, confined Soyegov to a high security ward with seven mentally ill patients and then diagnosed Soyegov as being in good health. However, Soyegov is still being held in the psychiatric hospital, but in a ward with lower security. Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 that Soyegov's case is being monitored by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) office in the capital Ashgabat.

Other religious prisoners of conscience known to Forum 18 are Cheper Annaniyazova, a Hare Krishna devotee, who has been jailed for seven years (see F18News 5 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=699) and former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who is serving a 22 year sentence on charges the government has refused to make public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271). Violence and psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs are said to have been used against previous religious prisoners of conscience (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438 and 17 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514).

Raids are continuing against Baptists in Turkmenistan. On Saturday 17 December, a prayer meeting of the Turkmen-speaking registered Baptist church in the town of Deynau, in the north-eastern Lebap region, was raided, Protestant sources have told Forum 18. Seven church members were holding a house group meeting when a Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officer who refused to give his name, a police officer called Sultanov, a Public Prosecutor called Isaev, and a local Imam called Murtazaev raided the house of a new convert to Protestant Christianity, Oguldurdy (full name unknown). During the raid, the MSS secret police officer and Prosecutor started shouting and threatening all the Christians who were present, and the officials then searched the house without a search warrant – which is illegal in Turkmenistan – for religious literature. Two Christians had their personal Bibles confiscated.

Later, the seven Baptists were taken to the Public Prosecutor's Office where they were again threatened and insulted. Officials told the Baptists that local authorities should hold public meetings in villages, where Christians should be personally named and denounced as traitors. The officials also threatened one woman with expulsion from her rented flat. The MSS secret police agent "became very angry" when asked for his name, Forum 18 was told, the MSS agent responding to this request with more threats and insults. The detained Baptists were forced to justify their actions in writing to the authorities, before being released.

The leaders of the Baptist Church in Deynau, Narmurat Mominov and Murat (last name unknown) are currently being put "under

strong pressure," Forum 18 has learnt. Pastor Mominov gave Lebap regional authorities a copy of the registration certificate of Turkmenistan's Baptist Union, which was registered centrally in Ashgabad in 2004 (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390). However, the regional authorities refused to accept the registration certificate, instead threatening Baptists with further attacks. Officials in Turkmenistan frequently deny that the registration of nationally registered religious organisations applies throughout the country (see eg. F18News 31 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535 and 2 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=623).

Separately, Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 that their situation continues to deteriorate, with illegal house searches without a search warrant continuing, along with the confiscation of religious literature and personal identity documents. A disturbing trend noted by Jehovah's Witnesses is that their members are increasingly being brought before courts, instead of the previous practice of trial by administrative commissions of Khyakimliks (local administrative bodies). Fines imposed by district courts are noticeably higher, as instead of the previous "normal" fine of 250,000 Manats (321 Norwegian Kroner, 40 Euros, or 48 US Dollars), fines now range between 1,250,000 Manats (1,603 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 240 US Dollars) and 2,000,000 Manats (2,566 Norwegian Kroner, 320 Euros, or 384 US Dollars). The minimum monthly wage is 1,500,000 Manats (1,924 Norwegian Kroner, 240 Euros or 289 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

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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