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TURKMENISTAN: Government severely restricts Haj numbers

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan continues to limit haj pilgrimage numbers to fewer than five per cent of the potential pilgrims, Forum 18 News Service has found, despite the requirement in Islam for able-bodied Muslims who can afford to do so to make the pilgrimage. This year, the Government is only allowing 188 pilgrims, despite an apparent quota from the Saudi authorities of more than 4,500 pilgrims. Forum 18 has been unable to find out from either the Turkmen Government or the Saudi authorities why the number of haj pilgrims is restricted. But Forum 18 has been told that "all those allowed to go are first checked out, presumably by the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of State Security secret police." At least one law-enforcement officer is said to accompany Turkmen pilgrims to Mecca. Unlike both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, whose government also imposes restrictions, other countries in the region do not restrict pilgrim numbers, but local Muslims often complain about the way the selection process operates.

The Turkmen government has allowed fewer than five per cent of the potential pilgrims in the country's haj quota to travel to Mecca for this year's pilgrimage. As in recent years, only 188 pilgrims have been allowed to undertake the haj, despite an apparent quota from the Saudi authorities of more than 4,500. Forum 18 News Service has been unable to find out why the Turkmen government restricts the number of haj pilgrims. "No official reason is ever given as to why haj numbers are strictly limited," an informed Ashgabat [Ashgabat] resident told Forum 18 in December 2005. "Of course state officials decide who goes and who doesn't. All those allowed to go are first checked out, presumably by the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police." The source said at least one officer from the law-enforcement agencies accompanies the pilgrims to Mecca.

The haj pilgrimage is the fifth of the Five Pillars of Islam and able-bodied Muslims who can afford to do so are obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. President Saparmurat Niyazov undertook the umra, known as the "lesser pilgrimage", to Mecca in 1992. However, at fewer than 200 pilgrims per year since 1992, the vast majority of Turkmenistan's Muslims will never be allowed by their government to make the pilgrimage.

Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry was unable to explain its restrictive policy to Forum 18. The office of Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov said the Minister "has no free time" to conduct interviews. "He is too busy as he has a very packed schedule," the official told Forum 18 on 4 January. Hussein Rejepov, the acting head of the Ministry's Consular Department, told Forum 18 the same day that he has "no information" about the subject. The telephones went unanswered on 4 and 5 January at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs.

Even the Saudi quota allocated to pilgrims from Turkmenistan remains a secret. Hazza Al-Alenazi, the head of the Consular Department at the Saudi Embassy in Ashgabat, declined to respond to Forum 18's written request for the information. "Unfortunately I cannot give you this information," he told Forum 18 on 5 January through an aide. "You should seek it from the Turkmenistan Government, if they will give it to you." Saudi missions in Moscow and elsewhere were also unable to provide Forum 18 with the information.

"Our 188 pilgrims flew out on a charter flight to Jeddah on 3 January," an official of the national airline, Turkmenistan Airlines, told Forum 18 from Ashgabat on 4 January. She added that they are due to be flown back on 24 January. Exactly the same number were allowed to travel to Mecca in January 2005.

The Ashgabat-based source told Forum 18 that demand to go on the haj pilgrimage is "large". "The Gengeshi formally decides if someone can go, but only after checking with the law-enforcement agencies," the source told Forum 18. "One man I know waited for three years to be allowed to go." The source added that most pilgrims are old men and women, though young men who are training to be imams or have recently trained are often allowed to go. The source said there is no retaliation from the authorities merely for applying to join the haj.

An Ashgabat-based imam, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 that the government pays all expenses for the 188 pilgrims, including flights, travel within Saudi Arabia and hotel costs, as well as giving individual pilgrims 350 US Dollars [2,293 Norwegian Kroner or 289 Euros] in cash for expenses. But the imam declined to say why he believes his government restricts the numbers of pilgrims so tightly.

Turkmen government restrictions on haj numbers were introduced in 1992, the year after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union. Initially numbers were limited to 150 annually, but this rose as the size of aeroplanes used increased. All the pilgrims travel on a single flight.

Uzbekistan also restricts the numbers of its citizens who can travel on the haj and requires all pilgrims to be approved by the authorities (see F18News 19 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=493). Such controls continued this year. On 4 January, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty quoted Shukhrat Ismailov of Uzbekistan's State Committee on Religious Affairs as saying that 5,000 Uzbek Muslims are going on this year's haj.

Unlike Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, other countries of the region do not restrict the numbers of their residents travelling on the haj, though local Muslims often have other complaints about the way the selection process operates. For example, Kyrgyzstan this year received a quota from the Saudi authorities of 4,500 pilgrims, with about that number travelling to Mecca. A further 2,000 applicants complained bitterly of being unable to travel, alleging that about 2,000 of the Kyrgyz places had been taken by Muslims from China who had bought faked Kyrgyz passports to be able to take part. Azerbaijan's initial quota from the Saudi authorities of 2,800 places was increased to 3,450 places after demand was especially strong.

In addition to bureaucratic hurdles, Muslims hoping to go on the haj often face problems raising the money to take part. In countries where applications far outnumber places, applicants frequently complain of bribe-seeking by officials involved in the process.

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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