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TURKMENISTAN: Demolition of places of worship continues

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In large-scale demolition projects in Turkmenistan, those expelled from their home get no compensation and often nowhere to live. Amongst the buildings demolished are religious communities' places of worship. The last surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian Apostolic church and a family-owned Sunni mosque in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi have been destroyed, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Exiled human rights activist Vyacheslav Mamedov told Forum 18 that the mosque "was used on Muslim festivals and for family events like weddings, funerals and sadakas [commemorations of the dead]." The former Armenian church "was a very beautiful building," Mamedov recalled. He told Forum 18 that there is widespread anger and fear over the destruction of the town's historic centre. Amongst places of worship in Turkmenistan, known to Forum 18 to have been demolished in the past, are mosques, an Adventist church, and a Hare Krishna temple.

The demolition of historic 19th century buildings in the central part of the Caspian port town of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk], including the last surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkmenistan, is continuing on the orders of President Saparmurat Niyazov. The authorities completed demolition of the church in February 2005, having previously refused to hand it back to the local Armenian community for worship.

Although many long-established local Armenians have left Turkmenistan since independence, estimates put the Armenian population of Turkmenbashi at about 2,000.

The Armenian embassy in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that it had been informed about the destruction of the historic church in Turkmenbashi, but the ambassador Aram Grigoryan was out of the country on 22 May and unable to comment on the destruction. No-one was available for immediate comment at the Armenian Foreign Ministry in Yerevan on 22 May, or at the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Echmiadzin near the Armenian capital.

Also demolished amid the wholesale destruction of the century-old heart of Turkmenbashi, which began in 2004, was a family-owned Sunni Muslim mosque. Human rights activist Vyacheslav Mamedov told Forum 18 on 22 May that the local Etrekov family started building the mosque on their own land, near the Turkmenbashi Hotel, in 1993 and began using it for prayers in 2001 as it neared completion. "Until its demolition in July 2005, it was used on Muslim festivals and for family events like weddings, funerals and sadakas [commemorations of the dead]," Mamedov told Forum 18. He himself left Turkmenbashi in 2004, as the campaign was beginning, and is now a refugee in western Europe.

The former Armenian church, built a century ago and consecrated by the then Catholicos (head of the Armenian Apostolic Church) in 1904, was confiscated by the Soviet authorities and turned into a warehouse. In 1993, Mamedov – as a local journalist and human rights activist – had supported attempts by the local Armenian community to form a cultural and religious centre in the town and regain possession of the church. He said the authorities consistently refused to register the community or allow it to function. "It was a very beautiful building," Mamedov recalls. "When we were trying to get it back in 1993, I remember looking inside and it was just used as a store for the local administration's old furniture and car parts."

Mamedov – who has obtained a copy of a secret local administration order from November 2005 detailing which streets are to be destroyed – said there is widespread anger and fear in Turkmenbashi over the destruction of the town's historic centre, reactions confirmed by the exile Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation. But Mamedov said the town's main Sunni Muslim mosque and the Russian Orthodox church are located close together in the newer parts of the town and are not in immediate danger of demolition.

In massive construction redevelopments in Ashgabad and elsewhere in Turkmenistan, those expelled from their homes ahead of demolition get no compensation and often nowhere else to live. Among places of worship bulldozed in Ashgabad was the Seventh-day Adventist church, built in the 1990s and which was destroyed in 1999 at only one week's notice. The authorities claimed the land was needed for a road-widening programme, but for some years the site was derelict. The Adventists have never been given any compensation and are not allowed to build a new church to replace the one destroyed. Shortly before Ashgabad's Adventist Church was demolished, in August 1999 a Hare Krishna temple outside the eastern town of Mary was demolished.

A mosque was among buildings in an entire settlement, Darvasa in the central Kara-Kum desert, which was destroyed in autumn

2004 after President Niyazov flew over in a helicopter and regarded the settlement as unattractive. Darvasa's mainly ethnic Uzbek residents were given just two hours to leave. One visitor to the settlement before its destruction told Forum 18 that the mosque had only just been completed when it was destroyed.

Other mosques in Turkmenistan have also been destroyed, apparently in some cases for failure to honour the President Niyazov's books of alleged "spiritual writings" (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481 and 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

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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