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TURKMENISTAN: "What will registration give us?"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Despite making several registration applications, the Armenian Apostolic Church community in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad has still not been given state registration, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Some religious communities have considered registration – including Protestants, Catholics and the Jehovah's Witnesses – but have not yet applied. Protestant congregations are sceptical about their chances of gaining registration. Forum 18 has been told that during interrogations of ethnic Turkmen Protestants, they are told to report everything that happens in their churches to the authorities. "You have to do this if you're registered," they are told. A Catholic parish has not applied for registration, as they are not allowed to have a foreign priest leading the parish. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that "there's still the very important question: what will registration give us? Others have got registration and it hasn't helped them."

Back in February, the Armenian Apostolic Church community in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] lodged an application for state registration. "Although three months have gone by the Justice Ministry has made no response," an Armenian who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service from Ashgabad on 22 May. "This is the third or fourth application the community has lodged."

No-one at the Registration Department of the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry was available to explain to Forum 18 why the application by Ashgabad's Armenian community has not been processed. Reached on 22 May, Maysa Sariyeva, who is head of the International Legal Affairs and Registration of Public and Religious Organisations Department, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 explained who was calling. Subsequent calls went unanswered. Also not answering his telephone on 22 and 23 May was Serdar Valiev, who reports to Sariyeva and has responsibility for registering religious communities.

The Armenian ambassador, Aram Grigoryan, was out of the country on 22 May and no-one at the Embassy was able to comment on the stalled registration application from the Ashgabad Armenian community. Nor was anyone available for 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.

The registration application was lodged exactly one year after the authorities destroyed the last surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian Apostolic church in the country, in the Caspian port town of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk], on the orders of President Saparmurat Niyazov. The authorities had previously refused to hand it back to the local Armenian community for worship (see F18News 23 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=786).

In the absence of any Armenian Apostolic church in Turkmenistan, Armenian Christians who wished to worship have had to attend Russian Orthodox churches (although the Armenian Church is of the Oriental, not the Orthodox family of Churches). An estimated one sixth of parishioners at Turkmenistan's Russian Orthodox churches are ethnic Armenians.

Meanwhile, other religious communities which have been considering lodging registration applications – including Protestant Christians, the Catholic parish in Ashgabad and the Jehovah's Witnesses – have not yet done so.

Forum 18 has learnt that several Protestant congregations are preparing registration applications, but many are sceptical that the Adalat Ministry will grant it. "All the churches wanting to get registration are made up of ethnic Turkmen and it is not so easy," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 22 May. "The authorities don't like this." The Protestant said that the Protestant congregations the Adalat Ministry was forced to register under international pressure from 2004 – including the Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Greater Grace, Light of the East and the Church of Christ - were all made up of ethnic Russians. "When the persecution was at its worst five or six years ago, ethnic Russian churches suffered, but Turkmen believers suffered the worst."

Even today, the Protestant added, every time officials interrogate any ethnic Turkmen Protestants they tell them they should report everything that happens in their churches to the authorities. "You have to do this if you're registered."

The Jehovah's Witnesses remain cautious. "Nothing has moved on the registration issue," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 22 May. "The authorities show no real desire to register us. There's still the very important question: what will registration give us?"

Others have got registration and it hasn't helped them." Contacts in 2005 with the Adalat Ministry were "not very encouraging", the source added. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses have not ruled out trying to get registration and are still working on preparing the necessary documentation.

Ashgabad's Catholic parish has not yet applied for registration, as it remains unhappy with the terms of the Religion Law and has not been able to meet Adalat Ministry officials to discuss the wording of the statute. "We want to explain to the Ministry the absolute impossibility for the parish to be led by a local citizen," one Catholic familiar with the process told Forum 18 on 23 May. "The authorities have to allow us to build up a community and only with time will there perhaps be a local priest who could lead the community. We want to discuss this point with the Ministry and we hope they'll understand it."

The Catholic said the community is grateful that the Turkmen authorities have allowed two Polish priests to serve the community. Mass is currently held on Vatican diplomatic territory in the Nunciature in Ashgabad. Eventually the Catholics would like to build a church to replace the one destroyed by an earthquake in Soviet times. "But the church is the community, not the building," the Catholic stressed to Forum 18.

Other religious communities registered since May 2004 are the Baha'is, the Hare Krishna community and the New Apostolic Church. Already registered were about a hundred Sunni Muslim mosques. Shia Muslim mosques are unofficially barred from registering. Most of the country's 12 Russian Orthodox churches were finally re-registered in November 2005, though the Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] parish was stripped of registration in 2003 and has been unable to regain it. The parish has also been prevented from completing building work on its church (see F18News 3 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=754).

Conditions that have been imposed on registered communities are highly restrictive, including bans on meeting for worship, including in private homes, and on printing and importing religious literature (see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521), tight financial restrictions and a ban on foreign citizens leading religious communities (see F18News 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=320). Many religious believers in Turkmenistan strongly object to these conditions, describing religious freedom in the country as "fictitious" (see F18News 16 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728).

Among the problems communities have experienced since registering are that nationally registered communities have had their regional communities' registration denied by officials in police raids (see F18News 19 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=707); and unwritten extra-legal obstacles have been placed in the way of unregistered communities registering, or registered communities meeting (see F18News 9 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=702). Registered congregations are also pressured to subscribe to the cult of personality around President Niyazov, and the Ruhnama, his alleged "spiritual writings" (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Unregistered religious activity remains illegal (see F18News 24 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=326).

Although extreme harassment of religious communities has eased off recently, official intimidation still occurs. This was described to Forum 18 by one Protestant as officials "inciting interreligious hatred" (see eg. F18News 19 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=717).

Among recent incidents, two teachers of the Koran in the village of Kongur near the south-eastern town of Mary were summoned by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police early in the year and banned from teaching the Koran, Jumadurdy Ovezov, a correspondent for Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service told Forum 18 from Mary on 15 May.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that in March, one of their members was detained in Ashgabad while he was on his way to visit a fellow-believer. A police officer hit him on the head several times, forced him to get into a car and took him to the police station. There he was interrogated and had his Bible and other religious books confiscated, but was released later that day. In April, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were coming out of a block of flats in Turkmenbashi when they were detained by police. They were taken by car to the local police station where they were searched and interrogated. "Officers used the usual crude words during the interrogation," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. The two were forced to write statements before being freed.

At 8 pm on 3 May, more than 15 officials raided a house group meeting of the Soygi (Love) Protestant Church in Ashgabad, confiscating Bibles and other personal belongings and subjecting the 13 church members present to extensive interrogation over two and a half hours, Compass Direct reported. The raid was led by the police and secret police, but included officials of the hyakimlik (local administration), foreigner registration office and the Committee for Religious Affairs. Church members were forced to reenact their meeting while police videotaped them.

One leader of the 35-strong unregistered Soygi Church even asked her interrogators to help it register with the government, in what one church member told Compass Direct was a "every bold move".

Meanwhile, Protestants have complained that some are still being prevented from travelling abroad for religious purposes, including

a group who had visas but were not handed their pre-paid tickets ahead of their planned departure from Ashgabad airport in April. "We don't know why this happened," one Protestant told Forum 18. "The travel company and all the other people at the airport kept putting the blame on each other."

Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova is still in jail, on a seven year jail term believed within Turkmenistan to have been inspired by the MSS secret police to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 3 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=754). (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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