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TURKMENISTAN: "We'll put you away for twelve years," Baptists told

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A Baptist church in Turkmenabad has become the tenth religious community known to have been raided since the authorities began their latest crackdown on religious minorities in early May. On 13 June, 11 officials raided a prayer meeting in an apartment, local Baptists reported in a statement reaching Forum 18 News Service. All those present were questioned for several hours. "We have been on your tracks for three months now, and we'll put you away for 12 years," officers warned church members Yeldash Roziev and Aleksandr Frolov. Head of the city police Alaverdy Khudoberdiev defended the raid, telling Forum 18 the police had done nothing unlawful.

A Baptist church in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) has become the tenth religious community known to have been raided by the authorities since the latest crackdown on religious minorities began in early May. On 13 June, 11 officials, including two in army uniform, raided a prayer meeting being held in an apartment belonging to church member Yeldash Roziev, local Baptists reported in a 14 June statement reaching Forum 18 News Service. Two of the Baptists were threatened with twelve-year prison sentences.

"All the believers were taken outside and were escorted by the soldiers to a strong point, the police station," church members reported. "After several hours of questioning and threats some believers were released, leaving Aleksandr Frolov, Yeldash Roziev, Aleksei Zasedatelev and Yelgiz Ilyasov still in custody." The Baptists say Frolov and Roziev were threatened during the questioning, with officers warning them: "We have been on your tracks for three months now, and we'll put you away for 12 years." The two were also threatened with being exiled from Turkmenistan.

Officers also tried to recruit Roziev as a spy within the church. "They tried to talk Yeldash into co-operating with them, hoping for information about the internal life of the church," the Baptists reported. "The brothers were released at around 2 o'clock in the morning, but their passports were retained and they were told that they should report to the police department on the morning of 14 June for further questioning." It is not yet known whether further action was taken against the church members on 14 June.

Reached by telephone on 17 June, the procurator of Turkmenabad, Nurmukhamed Nurmamedov, admitted to Forum 18 that the Baptists had been detained and questioned, but refused to make "any comment" until he received a written request.

The head of the city police, Alaverdy Khudoberdiev, strongly defended the police action, telling Forum 18 that there was nothing unlawful in what they had done because under Turkmen law "the activity of unregistered organisations is forbidden". (Turkmenistan's religion law does not in fact forbid the activity of unregistered religious organisations.) Khudoberdiev refused to give any information about the 14 June questioning of the Baptists.

Forum 18 had an even more peculiar conversation with Yagshimurat Atamuradov, head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad, who is answerable to the country's president. Atamuradov recognised the voice of Forum 18's correspondent and immediately hung up.

Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics. No faiths except for the officially-approved Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been allowed to register any communities. The government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal. Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and other Protestants, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutherans, the Jews, Hare Krishna communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and others are thus denied the opportunity of worshipping legally.

Since May, pressure on religious minorities has intensified with a series of raids in six different locations on various communities, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, as well as Hare Krishna communities (see F18News 10 June 2003). In all these cases, the police burst into private apartments where representatives of religious minorities had gathered, and took them to the police station. The fact that these police actions took place in various parts of the country at one and same time gives reason to think that they had been planned earlier by Ashgabad.

Dieter Matthei, political officer at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) centre in Ashgabad, told Forum 18 on 18 June that the centre had "no information" about the latest raid on the Baptist church in Balkanabad. He said it was difficult following up reports of such incidents. "Our possibilities are limited by manpower, resources and other factors," he declared.

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