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TURKMENISTAN: Second Baptist arrested in Turkmenbashi crackdown

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Days after a Baptist prisoner of conscience was sentenced to three years in a labour camp another Baptist, Yevgeny Potolov, from the same city was arrested by the MSS secret police on 19 May, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. No charges have been brought against him and the MSS is refusing to tell his wife Nadezhda why he has been held. Also, as well as jailing Vyacheslav Kalataevsky in a labour camp, the authorities are seizing two armchairs from his family after his wife Valentina refused to pay a fine for holding worship services in her home. "Had I been fined for committing a crime, that would have been fair," she told Forum 18. "But it's not right to be fined for worshipping God." Meanwhile, Merdan Shirmedov, a Protestant barred from leaving Turkmenistan to join his wife Wendy Lucas in the USA, missed the birth of their first child, a girl, on 18 May. "It was very very emotional not having Merdan there – he was so looking forward to being present at the birth," Lucas told Forum 18.

Just five days after one Baptist, Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, was sentenced to three years in a labour camp, another Baptist in the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk) was arrested. Baptist sources told Forum 18 News Service that Yevgeny Potolov – who leads a Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the city - was detained on 19 May and is being held in a detention centre in Turkmenbashi.

After Potolov left the family home that morning, his wife Nadezhda received a call on her mobile phone, apparently from her husband. "Nadezhda understood that her husband was calling but he didn't have time to say anything," the Baptists reported. "Then an unknown man rang and started to speak in Turkmen. She couldn't understand what he was saying but sensed that something had happened to her husband." Nadezhda and a friend went to the police to ask if her husband was there. When Potolov heard his wife's voice he shouted to her: "Christ is risen!"

The Baptists reported that when she asked the police why they were holding her husband and what they were accusing him of, she was told that his case is being handled by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why Potolov has been held or the nature of any accusations against him. The telephone at the reception at the Turkmenbashi MSS went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 21 and 22 May. The duty officer who answered the phone at the national headquarters of the MSS in the capital Ashgabad on 21 May declined to answer Forum 18's questions or to put the call through to any other MSS official.

The 36-year-old Potolov, a Russian citizen, leads a congregation affiliated with the Council of Churches, which rejects state registration in all the former Soviet republics where it operates. It believes that registration leads to unwarranted state interference in the internal life of congregations and unacceptable restrictions on their activities.

Potolov and Kalataevsky had their local residence permits stripped from them in June 2001, in punishment for their religious activity with an unregistered Baptist congregation. They were then seized by the MSS secret police and dumped across the border with Kazakhstan in Novy Uzen, without documents or money. Both had no option but to return to their families in Turkmenistan.

The Baptists call for prayers and appeals for Potolov to be freed, for his residence permit to be restored, for him to be returned to his family and for him to be allowed to resume his service to his congregation.

On 14 May Kalataevsky was sentenced to three years in an ordinary regime labour camp on charges of illegally crossing the border (see F18News 14 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=955). Kalataevsky's family told Forum 18 on 21 May that he had lodged his appeal against the sentence that same day. No date has yet been set for his appeal hearing.

Three days after the sentence was handed down, Kalataevsky's wife Valentina was summoned by the same Turkmenbashi city court which had sentenced her husband. The court executor Jemala (last name unknown) told her they were going to seize two armchairs that had been subject to a court order in 2004. The court order was imposed when she refused to pay a fine of 250,000 Manats [worth approximately 60 Norwegian Kroner, 7 Euros or 10 US Dollars] as a punishment for holding worship services in the family

home. Kalataevskaya has no paid work and has to look after the five of their children who remain at home.

"I told them then and I repeated it to the executor that I don't regard myself as having committed any crime and I'm not going to pay," Valentina Kalataevskaya told Forum 18. "Let them take the chairs if they want to. What else can we do? Had I been fined for committing a crime, that would have been fair. But it's not right to be fined for worshipping God."

Kalataevsky's congregation was one of several in Turkmenistan which left the Council of Churches at the beginning of this year. These congregations also object to state registration. "Registration is not something we're ready to do," Kalataevsky's family told Forum 18. "Look at all the restrictions they then impose." (A personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan on this is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728).

There has still been no change in the case of Merdan Shirmedov, a Protestant from Dashoguz [Dashowuz] who has been barred from leaving Turkmenistan to join his wife Wendy Lucas in the United States. He missed the birth of their first child, a girl, who was born on 18 May. "It was very very emotional not having Merdan there – he was so looking forward to being present at the birth," Lucas told Forum 18 on 22 May. "It is one of the hardest things we have had to go through, but we have to keep our eyes on the fact that we now have our daughter here."

Shirmedov is still trying to find out through the courts why the Turkmen authorities are still barring him from leaving. Earlier in May a court in Dashoguz told him they had nothing against him and had no information as to why he had been denied permission to leave. In mid-May, at the suggestion of the Dashoguz court, he lodged the same application to find out the basis of the decision to bar him from leaving with a court in Ashgabad. The court has one month to respond (see F18News 14 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=955).

Meanwhile, police and MSS secret police in the towns of Dashoguz and Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew [Charjew]), close to Turkmenistan's north-eastern border with Uzbekistan, have been harassing local Protestants, sources told Forum 18. In mid-May the MSS questioned one church member and forced him to write a statement that he would act as an informer for them. In a separate incident, local police accompanied by the local imam visited a home where Protestants had been meeting. Church members fear that the authorities could follow up on these two incidents. (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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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