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TURKMENISTAN: Baptist prisoner of conscience moved, another Baptist still held, a third Protestant still denied family reunification

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky – who is on a three year labour camp sentence – has been moved to a harsher labour camp in Seydi, Forum 18 News Service has been told. The camp is 1,200 kms (750 miles) away from his family home, and the family were denied the opportunity to see him in transit by armed guards with machine guns. Another Baptist, Yevgeny Potolov, remains in jail six weeks after his arrest. The MSS secret police appear to be indicating that he may be deported for his religious activity, local Baptists told Forum 18. Meanwhile Wendy Lucas, a US citizen whose husband Merdan Shirmedov has been denied permission to leave Turkmenistan since January, told Forum 18 there is no progress in his case. Turkmen Ambassador to the USA Meret Orazov has not answered her questions and has refused to answer Forum 18's questions. The exit ban means that Shirmedov has not yet seen his first child, a girl, who was born in the USA on 18 May.

In late June, imprisoned Baptist leader Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was moved 1,200 kms (750 miles) across the country to a labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi, where conditions for prisoners are worse than usual, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Given a three-year labour camp sentence in May, Kalataevsky was previously held in the prison in his home town of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk). "Again the authorities did this in great secrecy, without warning or saying anything to his wife," Kalataevsky's family told Forum 18 on 2 July. "She went to the prison and was just told he had been transferred." Meanwhile the leader of another Baptist congregation in Turkmenbashi, Yevgeny Potolov, remains in prison six weeks after his arrest, members of his church complained.

Kalataevsky, a Ukrainian citizen who is now 49, and Potolov, a Russian citizen who is now 36 (see F18News 22 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=960), had their local residence permits stripped from them in June 2001. In both cases, this was as a punishment for their religious activity with an unregistered Baptist congregation. They were then seized by the Ministry of State Security (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.

Kalataevsky now leads a congregation which is part of a network of independent Baptist churches in Turkmenistan. The MSS secret police arrested him on 12 March as he tried to regularise his residency. He was accused of crossing the border illegally under Article 214 part 2 of the Criminal Code, went on trial at Turkmenbashi city court on 7 May, was found guilty and given the three-year sentence. His family have insisted to Forum 18 throughout that Kalataevsky is being punished for his religious activity and that the trial did not follow Turkmen law. The Turkmenbashi city branch of the MSS, the MSS investigator and the judge refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 (see F18News 14 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=955).

Kalataevsky's transfer to the Seydi Labour Camp followed the failure of his appeal at Nebit-Dag City Court on 19 June. "Vyacheslav wasn't even allowed to attend the appeal – only the commission and his lawyer were present," the family told Forum 18 on 2 July. "Nor was his wife Valentina allowed to attend." The lawyer presented Kalataevsky's statement insisting that he was being punished for his religious activity. "There were no questions, no points raised, they then all stood up and the original sentence was confirmed."

The family say that as soon as the appeal verdict is received in writing, Kalataevsky intends to take his case to Turkmenistan's Supreme Court.

On 27 June Kalataevsky was taken by overnight train in a prison wagon to the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. There, he was transferred for the day to an Ashgabad prison and sent on that night in a prison wagon by train to Seydi, arriving on 29 June.

"We found out when the train was due to arrive in Ashgabad to see if we could catch a glimpse of him or even pass him a bottle of water, as temperatures were well over 40 degrees centigrade (105 degrees Fahrenheit)," the family told Forum 18. "We wanted to encourage him. But we saw him for just two seconds as he was taken from the train to the car. He didn't see us." The prison wagon was surrounded by armed guards, equipped with machine guns, who stopped anyone approaching the wagon.

Conditions in the Seydi Camp are harsh, the family say. "It is set in the desert and is close to several chemical works. Of course

conditions are not easy. It is like something from the Middle Ages."

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,

746222 Lebap vilayet,

Seydi,

uchr. LB-K/12

Seydi Labour Camp has been used for both Baptist and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience. There have been indications that these prisoners were tortured in the camp with psychotropic [mind-altering] drugs (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Kalataevsky's family point out that the last Baptist held in Seydi was Shageldy Atakov. He was held from December 1998 until being freed in January 2002, before the end of his sentence, after intense international pressure. While he was held in Seydi Labour Camp, Atakov's health deteriorated rapidly, due to repeated beatings, medical neglect, poor diet and torture with psychotropic drugs. More recently, Seydi Camp has also held several Jehovah's Witness prisoners, two of whom were threatened with death while being imprisoned there in April 2004 (see F18News 19 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=323).

Fellow Baptists have also told Forum 18 that Atakov has once again been denied permission to leave Turkmenistan. "Shageldy applied again in June to the Migration Service to be allowed to go abroad but they are still refusing to allow him to leave without giving any reasons," they told Forum 18. In 2006, when he was also banned from leaving the country, a Migration Service official confirmed that an exit blacklist exists and is operated in conjunction with the MSS secret police (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

Potolov – who was arrested on 19 May - leads a congregation in Turkmenbashi of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to apply for state registration, believing that this leads to state interference in church life. Protestants within Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 of numerous unwritten controls on registered communities, including forced co-operation with the MSS secret police (see F18News 16 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728). He was arrested on 19 May, on the same charges as Kalataevsky of illegally crossing the border (see F18News 22 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=960),.

However, Potolov's fellow Baptists reported on 26 June that he has not been put on trial and remains in a special holding unit in Turkmenbashi. They say the MSS secret police have asked his wife Nadezhda if she will leave Turkmenistan, if he is deported. MSS officials also told her that Potolov's case has now been transferred to the Migration Service in Ashgabad, who will decide what will happen to him.

"All this indicates that they want to deport him from Turkmenistan," local Baptists told Forum 18. They say he is insisting that the authorities return to him the residence permit they annulled "illegally" in 2001 when they deported him, allowing him to return to his own home and his wife and their five children.

Deportation has been used before as a weapon against freedom of thought, conscience and belief, for example in the case of a Russian Baptist, Aleksandr Frolov, was deported in June 2006 because of his religious activity. The deportation separated him from his wife, a Turkmen citizen, their three year old son, and their five month old daughter (see F18News 14 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=799).

The religious prisoner of conscience serving the longest sentence in the entire former Soviet Union is Turkmenistan's former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah. He was given a 22 year sentence in 2004 on charges the authorities have repeatedly refused to make public. The head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, Charygeldy Seryaev, professed ignorance to Forum 18 of Nasrullah's continued imprisonment. "I don't know where he is. How can I know? I have only been in this job since July 2006," he told Forum 18 in May (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963).

Meanwhile Wendy Lucas, a US citizen whose husband Merdan Shirmedov has been denied permission to leave Turkmenistan since January, told Forum 18 there is no progress in having the ban overturned. A court in his home town of Dashoguz [Dashowuz] said it had no information about why he was being denied permission to leave and suggested he should seek the information through a court in Ashgabad. Shirmedov then lodged an application in mid-May (see F18News 22 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=960).

"The court should have responded within a month, but didn't," Lucas told Forum 18 from the United States on 2 July. "However it might help his case, as the failure to respond shows that the authorities are not complying even with their own rules." She said an

enquiry has now been sent to Turkmenistan's General Prosecutor, Muhametguly Ogshukov. Both Lucas and Shirmedov believe that the exit ban is because he is a member of a prominent Protestant family in Dashoguz.

Lucas has raised her husband's case with Meret Orazov, the Turkmen Ambassador in Washington. However, she says she has had no response in three months to her written enquiry. Reached by Forum 18 on 2 July and asked why Shirmedov is being denied permission to leave his own country, Ambassador Orazov responded: "I don't know about that." The line was then cut. When Forum 18 phoned back immediately, his aide said Ambassador Orazov was too busy to accept any calls.

The denial of exit permission meant that Shirmedov missed the birth of their first child, a girl, who was born in the United States on 18 May. He has yet to see his daughter.

Sources within Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 that increasing crackdowns on religious minorities – even during the visits of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour and of Ambassador Christian Strohal, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – mean that "the bad times are coming back" (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963). (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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