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TURKMENISTAN: Another Baptist deported to Russia

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Seven weeks after being arrested for religious activity, Baptist pastor Yevgeni Potolov has been deported to Russia, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Pastor Potolov's deportation separates him from his wife and seven children. While he was in prison, the MSS secret police gave the Migration Service a document declaring the Pastor to be a "dangerous person." Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why Potolov was deported and why arrests, raids and deportations in punishment for peaceful religious activity are increasing. Others deported in earlier years for their religious activity have not been allowed to return to their homes. After Baptist leader Aleksandr Frolov was deported in June 2006, his wife Marina, a Turkmen citizen, appealed for him to be allowed back to live with her and their two young children. But in the face of Turkmenistan's refusal of family re-unification, she has now joined him in Russia. "I hadn't seen my husband for a year and didn't want our family to be split," she told Forum 18.

Seven weeks after he was arrested in his home city of Turkmenbashi [Turkmenbashy] (formerly Krasnovodsk), Baptist pastor Yevgeni Potolov was subjected to his second deportation from Turkmenistan in punishment for his religious activity. "They took me to the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] at the beginning of the month and then, on 7 July, put me on the train to Russia," he told Forum 18 News Service from his parents' home near the Russian city of Kursk on 16 July. "They gave me no reason for the deportation." Potolov, a Russian citizen, said he wants to return to his wife and their seven children in Turkmenistan. "We pray that God will open the door to this."

Potolov said that while he was in prison, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police gave the Migration Service a document declaring him to be a "dangerous person", an accusation he rejects.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials why Potolov was deported and why arrests, raids and deportations in punishment for peaceful religious activity are again increasing.

Reached on 17 July, Aygozel Hezretova, head of the Legal Information Centre at the Ministry of Justice in Ashgabad, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 explained who was calling. Forum 18 was unable to reach Shirin Akhmedova, director of the government-sponsored National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, or her colleague Shemshat Atajanova on 17 or 18 July. Officials said both were out and no-one else was available to discuss the position of religious believers in Turkmenistan. Likewise the telephones went unanswered on 17 and 18 July at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs.

The 36-year-old Potolov, a Russian citizen, moved to Turkmenistan with his wife Nadezhda and their children in 1998. All of them received residence permits in the western port city of Turkmenbashi. He led a congregation affiliated with the Baptist 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 soon ran into problems with the secret police. In early 2001 he was detained in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew), where he was beaten and told he should "go to preach in Russia".

Potolov and another Baptist pastor, Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, had their residence permits in Turkmenbashi stripped from them on orders of the local administration chief in June 2001, in punishment for their religious activity. They were then seized by the secret police and dumped across the border with Kazakhstan in Novy Uzen, without documents or money. Both had no choice but to return to their families in Turkmenistan.

Kalataevsky was arrested in March 2007, as he tried to regularise his status, and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in May for illegally crossing the border. He was transferred in late June to an ordinary regime labour camp near Seydi (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986). Kalataevsky's wife Valentina was able to visit her husband in the labour camp in early July. "Vyacheslav looked very thin," one family member told Forum 18 on 18 July.

Potolov was arrested on 19 May and was held in a special holding unit in Turkmenbashi. Unlike Kalataevsky, Potolov was not tried and imprisoned. Indications soon emerged that the authorities were preparing to deport him. MSS secret police officers asked his wife Nadezhda in June if she would leave Turkmenistan were he deported. MSS officials also told her that Potolov's case had been

transferred to the Migration Service in Ashgabad, who would decide what would happen to him (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

Potolov told Forum 18 that when he was arrested, his personal Bible and other Christian literature he had with him was confiscated. "They never returned it," he noted. "I asked the MSS secret police to hand it back, but they told me it had been passed on to the Religious Department of the local hakimlik [administration], which is headed by an imam. They said it would be returned if there was nothing dangerous in it, but it never was."

Potolov told Forum 18 that once the decision had been taken to deport him, events moved fast. On 5 July – soon after his arrival in the capital - he was escorted on a train from Ashgabad to Atamurad, the last station in Turkmenistan before the border with Uzbekistan. On 7 July officials gave him back his Russian passport and, without a ticket or any money, put him on a train travelling from the Tajik capital Dushanbe to Moscow, which passes through Turkmenistan.

"The conductors on the train didn't want to take me without a ticket, but the officials insisted," Potolov told Forum 18. "I had to explain to them who I was and why I had no ticket or money." As the train travelled through Kazakhstan he was able to contact fellow Baptists in the Russian city of Astrakhan. The conductor put him off the train at Aksaraisky, the first station in Russia close to Astrakhan, where church members met him and took care of him.

Potolov said that his wife and their children still have valid residence permits in Turkmenbashi. "My wife again applied for permission for me to be allowed to return home today [16 July]," he told Forum 18. "But this was rejected. The Turkmen Migration Service refused to accept the application. They just said they had an 'order from above' not to accept it." He said the last time he had seen his wife and two of their children was on 3 July, just before his transfer to Ashgabad. "They were allowed to bring me a parcel and see me." He added that his wife is expecting their eighth child.

It is significant that the problems Potolov and Kalataevsky have faced stem from punishments originally handed down years ago. Potolov told Forum 18 that while he was being held in Turkmenbashi, his wife received a phone call from the local court asking why she had not paid a fine handed down several years ago for hosting unregistered religious services. "We consider we have committed no offence, so we didn't pay such fines," Potolov told Forum 18. He said his wife had refused to go to court as the result of a telephone call and told court officials she would not pay the fine. "They threatened again to confiscate household items from us."

Jehovah's Witnesses have also told Forum 18 that the authorities have in 2007 begun looking back over earlier penalties and following up fines that were never paid (see F18News 20 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=997).

Controls over peaceful religious activity have stepped up since Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov took over as President in the wake of the death in December 2006 of Saparmurat Niyazov (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894). The number of raids has increased, including one in May by the MSS secret police, local officials and the local mullah on a Protestant congregation near Turkmenabad made up of ethnic Turkmens (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963).

Believers prominent in religious communities remain on the exit blacklist, among them the Baptist former prisoner Shageldy Atakov (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

At the same time, those deported in earlier years in punishment for their religious activity have not been allowed to return. After Baptist leader Aleksandr Frolov was deported in June 2006, his wife Marina, a Turkmen citizen, appealed for him to be allowed back to live with her and their two young children (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

Lack of success over a year led her to decide to join him in Russia and she left Turkmenistan on 30 May. "The Migration Service told Aleksandr verbally he was banned from returning for five years," she told Forum 18 from the Russian town of Penza in early July. "I hadn't seen my husband for a year and didn't want our family to be split."

Religious communities which try to operate in accordance with Turkmenistan's restrictive laws – which themselves break the country's human rights commitments - are prevented from doing so by officials. Forum 18 has learnt of no new registrations of religious communities since summer 2005, despite attempts by several communities – including Catholics, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses - to gain legal status. 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). Many communities are therefore reluctant to apply for registration (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787).

No news has emerged about the imprisoned former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in 2004 on charges the authorities have consistently refused to make public. His extended family, who live in the northern region around Dashoguz [Dashhowuz], are increasingly concerned about his fate. Charygeldy Seryaev, the head of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, professed ignorance to Forum 18 in May of Nasrullah's continued imprisonment (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963).

Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses have been both detained and jailed in 2007 for their religious activity, including conscientious objection to military service. The longest jail sentence imposed so far this year has been given to Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, given three years in a labour camp (see F18News 4 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=987).

Amidst what appears to be a growing crackdown of raids and public threats – even during high-level visits by United Nations (UN) and Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) human rights officials - Protestant sources within Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 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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