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TURKMENISTAN: Old "offences" used to punish current religious activity

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witnesses are the latest religious minority in Turkmenistan to have noted to Forum 18 News Service the authorities' use of past "offences" to repress current religious activity. Baptists have also noted this trend as part of the authorities' increasing use of anti-terrorist police and MSS secret police raids, arrests, imprisonment and deportation to punish peaceful religious activity. Since the beginning of 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that pressure on their members has increased. Meetings have been raided, literature confiscated and fines imposed. Jehovah's Witnesses still working in state agencies are being held up for harassment and ridicule in front of fellow workers and pressured to leave their jobs, while many have already been dismissed or had their contracts discontinued. The authorities have refused to discuss these cases with Forum 18 and local Jehovah's Witnesses "have not seen any indications of willingness on the part of state agencies to open a dialogue with them to resolve the difficulties."

Jehovah's Witnesses are among the religious minorities in Turkmenistan to have told Forum 18 News Service that pressure on their members has increased since the beginning of 2007. Meetings have been raided, literature confiscated and fines imposed. Jehovah's Witnesses still working in state agencies are being held up for harassment and ridicule in front of fellow workers and pressured to leave their jobs, while many have already been dismissed or had their contracts discontinued.

A new peak in such violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief – which still continue - was reached in April, described by Jehovah's Witnesses as "the most difficult period in a long time." In May, facing similar violations, Protestant sources within Turkmenistan told Forum 18 that "the bad times are coming back" (see F18News 25 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=963).

The latest trend in attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses has been to enforce sentences on old cases, they have observed. "A number of Witnesses have been summoned to police stations in connection with incidents that took place several years ago," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Some fines were issued as long as three years ago but are only now being enforced."

A similar trend to use old cases as an excuse to repress the current activity of religious minorities has also been noted by Baptists, as in the cases of the deportation of Pastor Yevgeni Potolov (see F18News 18 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=996), and imprisonment for three years in a labour camp of prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

Also, two Jehovah's Witnesses - Nuryagdy Gayyrov and Bayram Ashirgeldyyev – have been arrested for refusing to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience (see F18News 4 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=987). They, together with another Jehovah's Witness, have just been sentenced (see F18News 20 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=998).

Another example of the trend to use old cases to punish current religious activity cited by Jehovah's Witnesses is the case of Emmeyat Nazarova. She was warned in June that she must pay a fine of 1,250,000 Manats (300 Norwegian Kroner, 38 Euros or 53 US Dollars at the unofficial exchange rate) handed down earlier by the Kopetdag District Court in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat]. This was imposed for violating Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "violating the Law on Religious Organisations".

On 26 June, police accompanied by unknown men came to Nazarova's Ashgabat home. As the men had no court order she refused to let them in. They then summoned a workman to break down the door. The Jehovah's Witnesses say she phoned the Ashgabat Centre of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but they suggested she should appeal to the Prosecutor's Office.

The unidentified men took items worth twice the amount of Nazarova's fine. Her subsequent appeals to the Prosecutor's Office were unsuccessful. This is the usual experience of religious minorities appealing to the authorities against violations by the authorities of freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials why arrests, raids and deportations in punishment for peaceful religious activity are again increasing. The telephones went unanswered on 17 and 18 July at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs.

Reached on 17 July, Aygozel Hezretova, head of the Legal Information Centre at the Adalat (Justice) Ministry 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, on 17 or 18 July. However, reached on 19 July, Akhmedova's colleague Shemshat Atajanova declined to discuss anything with Forum 18. As soon as Forum 18 explained who was calling and asked about pressure on religious communities she put the phone down. When Forum 18 called back the line had been transferred to an answerphone.

Earlier this year, two raids on meetings took place on 2 April, the day the Jehovah's Witnesses commemorate the Memorial of Christ's Death, the most important event of the year for Jehovah's Witnesses. That evening in the city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew), eight police officers and eight officers in civilian clothes burst into Maral Jorayeva's flat. Ten adults (four of them Jehovah's Witnesses) and six children had gathered for the commemoration. Without producing identification, the officers searched her home. Only one of the officers, Lieutenant Yusup Rahmanov, identified himself. Bibles, religious literature and notebooks were confiscated from those present. The police also took Jorayeva's identity document.

All those present were taken to the Department for Organised Crime and Terrorism at the local police station, where they were interrogated, threatened and forced to make written statements. "The children were crying and were interrogated without their parents' consent," the Jehovah's Witnesses complain. All were released at 11.15 p.m. Instead of issuing a receipt for the confiscated personal items, those present were instructed to appear at the 2nd Police Department three days later.

A Memorial observance at a private flat in Ashgabad was also targeted on 2 April. Law-enforcement officers blocked the stairway exit with four vehicles as those present were leaving. The officers were wearing civilian clothes and without producing any documents tried to force the people into the cars to drive them to the police station. Bags were searched and Bibles and songbooks confiscated. "Since many refused to get into the vehicles, the officers used force," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The next day, one 73-year-old Witness even had bruises on her arms because of the rough treatment."

They add that children who were with their parents were frightened and cried. Parents urged that their children be released and the officers agreed to release some of them. Three children however were forced to accompany their parents to the police station and to stay there until 11.30 p.m. Those who refused to get into the cars were escorted to the police station on foot. At the police station, written statements were required. In addition to the police officers, representatives from the local Hakimlik, the Religious Affairs Department, a local Muslim imam, as well as an officer from the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police were present.

Also in Ashgabad, on 9 April the City Hakimlik (administration) summoned Anna Karaeva by telephone to report to the Religious Affairs Department. Since no official summons was issued she refused to go. Two days later, the district police officer brought her a summons. A five-member commission interrogated her for two hours with questions such as: "Why do you intrude on Muslim families, break them up, and exhort young men not to take up arms?" The commission wanted to issue a fine of 1,250,000 Manats (300 Norwegian Kroner, 38 Euros or 53 US Dollars at the unofficial exchange rate). However, Karaeva stated that she would refuse to pay. She also refused to make a written statement.

At the beginning of April, Karaeva was dismissed from her employment because of pressure from MSS secret police officers who forced her to sign a statement that she had resigned voluntarily.

Numerous other violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief have also been experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses. These include a raid on a Turkmenabad flat in which female Jehovah's Witnesses were abused. "The police officers were very rough and used obscene language," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "One of the Witnesses was body-searched and her private parts touched." The women were held at a police station, the flat was searched in their absence, two identity documents were confiscated and charges of "violating the Law on Religious Organisations" under Article 205 of the Administrative Code were filed in court against two of the women.

One of the women, S. Rozyyeva filed a complaint against the police actions with the District Prosecutor's Office. The Prosecutor, Y. Gylydjev, heard her complaint and agreed that the confiscation of her identity document was illegal and said he was willing to help get it returned. However, after the prosecutor called in the district police officer and listened to him, Prosecutor Gylydjev changed his mind, accused Rozyyeva of lying and said that he would help the police file the case in court so that she would be fined.

Other violations include a raid by the 6th Police Department – the anti-terrorism department – on a religious meeting in a private home in Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag). All six people present were taken to a police station, searched, threatened with dismissal from work and 15 days' detention, and interrogated during the next two days. Large fines were imposed on five of the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with threats that bailiffs would confiscate property from anyone unable to pay the fine and that they would also be dismissed from their jobs if they did not pay.

The raids and fines against Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to follow similar punishments earlier in 2007. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that many of those were summoned by the 6th Department of the police or the MSS, as well as by religious affairs officials in local hakimliks (administrations).

In a possible co-ordinated attempt by the authorities to play off one religious minority against another, Protestant sources in Ashgabad told Forum 18 in June 2007 that MSS secret police officers had asked them how to deal with the Jehovah's Witnesses. These questions were asked in both Ashgabad and in Mari [Mary].

The Jehovah's Witnesses are among a number of religious communities who have tried to gain legal status in vain. Nine religious minority communities gained legal status between Summer 2004 and Summer 2005, but it appears that the Adalat (Justice) Ministry decided thereafter that no further applications would be accepted. 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).

Local Jehovah's Witnesses have tried to discuss with the authorities their desire to be able to practise their faith freely, but they report that they "have not seen any indications of willingness on the part of state agencies to open a dialogue with them to resolve the difficulties". (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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