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TURKMENISTAN: Another conscientious objector sentenced, another police raid

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Ashirgeldy Taganov is the sixth conscientious objector to be sentenced in Turkmenistan in recent months for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses complain that the court procedure was "hasty" and "careless" and that Taganov could not present his case in full. He was sentenced to an 18 month suspended sentence, which imposes harsh restrictions. Offenders cannot leave Ashgabat and must be back home each evening by 8 pm. They must also find work. "This is very difficult as there is no work available," another religious conscientious objector told Forum 18. Meanwhile, a Baptist congregation has been raided by police, who confiscated hymn books, a Bible concordance, books of poetry and 47 CD recordings of sermons and hymns. The Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs conceded to Forum 18 that any such raid would be "unpleasant", but said he had heard nothing about it. He then put the phone down.

On 18 December, Ashirgeldy Taganov became the sixth Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector to be sentenced in Turkmenistan in 2007 for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service on 9 January. Judge Dovlet Sopiev of Niyazov District Court in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] handed him a suspended sentence of 18 months. Jehovah's Witnesses complain that the court procedure was "hasty" and "careless" and that Taganov could not present his case in full. The prosecution had demanded that he should serve an 18-month sentence in prison.

Two other Jehovah's Witnesses serving suspended sentences for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Begench Shakhmuradov received a two year suspended sentence in September 2007, and Bayram Ashirgeldyyev was given an 18 month suspended sentence in July 2007. Ashirgeldyyev has already been threatened with a new sentence, even though he is still serving his current suspended sentence. A further three Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced in 2007 but were freed in a presidential amnesty in October 2007 (see F18News 9 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1031).

Those serving suspended sentences face tight restrictions. They cannot leave Ashgabat and must be back home each evening by 8 pm. They must also find work. "This is very difficult as there is no work available," Ashirgeldyyev told Forum 18 on 26 July 2007 (see F18News 26 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1000).

Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, defended the sentence. "All this is being done in accordance with the law," he insisted to Forum 18 from Ashgabat on 10 January. "The law is normal and they violated the law, so that's why they should be punished." He refused to discuss why those who cannot serve in the armed forces on grounds of religious conscience could not be offered an alternative, non-combat service.

Taganov, an 18-year-old from Ashgabat whose nickname is Azis, was sentenced under Article 219, Part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. Jehovah's Witness young men insist they are ready to do alternative non-military service, but Turkmenistan offers no alternative service possibility for those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience.

Taganov told the conscription board on 1 October that he was rejecting military service. He was called to the Prosecutor's Office of Niyazov District on 2 November. There he was interrogated by an officer named A. Khandurdyev. He was told that his family members would also be interviewed and then the case would be filed in court (see F18News 4 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1057).

Interestingly, Judge Sopiev, who presided over Taganov's trial, is known to have presided in an earlier religious case. The local Khyakimlik (administration) of Ashgabat's Kopetdag District brought a suit in January 2001 to confiscate the Pentecostal church based in a residential property – registered in the name of the pastor, Viktor Makrousov - as it was used for unregistered worship. Despite Makrousov's objection in court, Sopiev upheld the confiscation. To this day, the Pentecostal congregation – and other religious communities whose places of worship were confiscated or bulldozed by the authorities – have not received compensation (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=548).

In addition to the three amnestied Jehovah's Witnesses, two other religious prisoners were amnestied in 2007: former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah and Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky.

However, Kalataevsky – a Ukrainian citizen who led a Baptist congregation in his native city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] - was forced to leave Turkmenistan on 11 December after the authorities refused his application to remain with his wife and children. Before his enforced departure officials warned Kalataevsky that any services his church held would be illegal and tried to force him to sign a statement declaring that it would not meet (see F18News 21 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1050).

Meanwhile, Baptists report that police raided a service on 29 December in a private home owned by Olga Grishina in the town of Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) in western Turkmenistan. "At 12.30, when the service had already finished and the believers were talking among themselves," the Baptists told Forum 18 on 3 January, "officials arrived: Senior Lieutenant Etrekov and five people in civilian clothes who refused to give their names." All those present had their names taken. The officers took all the religious literature on the table, including hymn books, a Bible concordance, books of poetry and 47 discs with recordings of sermons and hymns.

The Baptists report that Grishina and two men were taken to the local police station. "There a record was drawn up and they were promised that the confiscated literature and discs would be checked. If nothing was against the law they would be returned." The three were then released.

Local Baptists called for the literature and discs to be returned and for freedom to conduct religious worship without harassment. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the confiscated materials were returned.

The Balkanabad congregation belongs to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse to apply for state registration in all the former Soviet states where they operate.

Other religious communities have faced pressure and harassment for meeting without state approval in the second half of 2007, including other Protestants, Muslims and people from other faiths. Some of these communities were threatened not to lodge registration applications (see F18News 21 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1050).

Gurbanov of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs conceded to Forum 18 that any such raid would be "unpleasant", but said he had heard nothing about it. "Thank you for the interesting information, we'll look into it." He declined to say what action, if any, his office would take. Asked why there is a constant stream of such raids on religious communities across Turkmenistan, Gurbanov responded: "It's not constant, maybe it happens from time to time." He declined to answer any other questions and put the phone down.

Although criminal penalties for violating Turkmenistan's harsh restrictions on religious activity were lifted in 2004, penalties under the Code of Administrative Offences remain.

Article 205 punishes leaders who refuse to register their communities, leaders or participants in unregistered religious activity, leaders and members of registered religious organisations who conduct youth work or activity not directly related to religious worship and those who violate the regulations on conducting religious ceremonies and processions. Those found guilty of any of these activities face fines of between five and ten months' minimum wages. Under the same Article, members of registered or unregistered religious communities who receive funds or other material support from local people or foreigners without recording it officially face fines of between ten and twenty months' minimum wages and confiscation of the donation.

Officials continue to treat unregistered peaceful religious activity as a crime and to frustrate some attempts to gain state registration. For example, the Baptist congregation in Turkmenbashi does not oppose state registration on principle, but officials have claimed that it does not have enough adult citizen members to apply for registration. They added that unregistered religious activity, including people meeting together for worship in homes, is banned. "I asked them to show me what part of the law bans unregistered worship and they were unable to do so," Pastor Kalataevsky told Forum 18 (see F18News 21 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1050).

Registered communities such as the Russian Orthodox Church are subject to state interference in their internal life, such as bans on receiving literature and pressure to isolate them from their fellow believers (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037). 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). (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.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

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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