

18 April 2008

TURKMENISTAN: "It is our duty to check up on religious organisations"

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

Some ten officials from the local Religious Affairs Department, the police, secret police, Justice Ministry and Tax Ministry raided a Bible class held by the Greater Grace Protestant church in a private flat in the capital Ashgabad on 11 April. Asked the reason for the check-up, Murad Aksakov of the local administration told Forum 18 News Service they wanted to find out how many people attended the classes, who those people were, and whether everything was in order with the church's documents. Pastor Vladimir Tolmachev told Forum 18 he was warned that the church was not allowed to teach its own members without permission from the government's Religious Affairs Committee, even though its officially-recognised Charter allows this. Officials told Tolmachev he would receive an official warning. Further such warnings could lead to the church's registration being stripped from it, rendering all its activities illegal. In an illustration of the problems even registered religious communities face, the church has no building of its own and has already had to move its services ten times this year.

Officials who raided a Bible class held by the Greater Grace Protestant church in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 11 April have insisted that the church does not have the right to teach its own members without approval from the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The church was checked by about ten officials from the Religious Affairs Department of the Hyakimlik (the executive authority) of the city's Kopetdag district, the Justice Ministry, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, local police and the Tax Ministry. A Religious Affairs department official from the Hyakimlik told Forum 18 he saw nothing wrong with the check-up, and insisted that they had a right to check up on organisations. Forum 18 was told that the church could face removal of registration if violations are found this time and then again on a future occasion.

Religious activity without state registration remains illegal and punishable, in defiance of Turkmenistan's international human rights commitments. Both registered and unregistered religious communities face intermittent raids from various state agencies.

Like most of the few non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities allowed to gain legal status, Ashgabad's Greater Grace church has no dedicated place of worship. Even if it could afford it, church members doubt if they would be allowed to buy one.

This makes it vulnerable to official pressure as owners prepared to rent to a religious minority congregation are few. Communities which had their places of worship bulldozed or confiscated over the past decade – including Muslims, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Baptists and the Hare Krishna community – have been given no compensation (see F18News 14 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1088).

Vladimir Tolmachev, the pastor of the Greater Grace church, told Forum 18 on 15 April that the government officials and police arrived unexpectedly and disturbed their Bible class. "I had to gather our people in one room and asked them to stay there until I could sort out what they wanted," he reported. He said he was surprised to see as many as ten officials come to check on them. "We have our registration, our two employees pay their taxes out of the salary they receive from the church, and we are not doing anything illegal."

Tolmachev said it was disturbing for them before the neighbours, since it is not regarded as good when law-enforcement officials arrive at the door. "They checked our papers, and asked two people from the church whether they were forced to attend the classes." The officials realised that everything was fine but still invited him to visit the Kopetdag district Hyakimlik the following day, a Saturday, he told Forum 18.

"At the Hyakimlik, officials asked me to sign a paper admitting our violations," Tolmachev told Forum 18. Officials told him the church was not allowed to teach classes as it does not have the necessary special permission from the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs. "I explained to them that we do not have an official Bible Seminary, and the courses we teach in our church cover basic Christian doctrines," Tolmachev reported. The Bible classes are for the internal needs of the community and teaching their members what they believe is a right expressed in their Charter confirmed by the Justice Ministry, Tolmachev insisted.

When he refused to sign the paper he was warned that he would in any case receive an official warning soon. He told Forum 18 that based on a regulation of the Justice Ministry, if an organisation receives two warnings it will be stripped of its official registration. "Without official registration we would be an illegal organisation," Tolmachev pointed out.

Murad Aksakov, an official at the Kopetdag Hyakimlik Religious Affairs Department, told Forum 18 that they did indeed visit the church "since it is our duty to check up on religious organisations". "We went there as guests, and I don't see anything wrong with that since we have the right to check up on religious organisations," Aksakov told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 16 April. Asked the reason for the check-up, he said they just wanted to find out how many people attended the classes, who those people were, and whether everything was in order with the church's documents.

Forum 18 tried to reach Bibi Tagieva of the Justice Ministry, who also was present during the check-up. The official who answered the phone on 16 April said that she was on sick-leave, and they did not know when she would be back. Forum 18 tried to talk to another official from the international and legal issues department about the case but the official categorically refused to discuss it. "We are not going to talk to you over the phone," she said. "Write us a letter, and we'll look into it." She then put the phone down.

Tolmachev told Forum 18 that the church needs a larger place for Bible classes, as classes for up to 25 students are held at a small one-room apartment. However, the Hyakimlik refuses to give permission to the church to rent a place for the classes. "We have applied for permission to the Hyakim [head of the administration] more than a month ago, but there has been no response yet," he complained. "Without written permission from the Hyakim no-one would rent space to you in Ashgabad."

Tolmachev complained that the situation with the hall for the church services was not good either. "We have been renting the current place for a little over a month now but we don't know how long we will be able to keep this place." The proprietors would kick them out if official pressure would come on, he told Forum 18. "Since the end of December we have been evicted from ten places already."

Other religious communities have been raided this year. A Protestant congregation meeting in a private flat in the south-eastern town of Mary was raided in mid-February by about 13 police officers and other officials, Protestants who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. The police – who had no warrant - wrote down the names of all fifteen or so church members present and briefly detained them. CDs of religious content were confiscated and police refused to return them. "They refused to give a record of the items confiscated," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They very rarely do so."

Protestants report that it is even more difficult to hold meetings in villages than in towns. One Protestant told Forum 18 that in a village in eastern Turkmenistan, which the Protestant preferred not to be identified, a church member who had hosted meetings in her home died. "The aksakals [village elders] banned people from attending the funeral and refused to lend chairs and crockery for the traditional funeral meal," the Protestant reported.

"The council of elders summoned a meeting and the Christians were not invited," the Protestant added. "At the meeting, the local police, prosecutor's office and secret police officials all said that Christianity had to be stopped. They ordered residents to watch their neighbours, see who the Christians are visiting and report this to the police and elders. Families of believers are now very afraid." The family of the dead woman who had hosted church meetings were too afraid to allow them to continue, the Protestant reported.

In December 2007 a Baptist congregation in Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) was raided (see F18News 10 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1069).

Religious communities face constant difficulty importing religious literature (it cannot be produced legally within Turkmenistan). Foreigners suspected of being involved in religious activity have been expelled. Local religious communities cannot invite their fellow-believers from abroad. The government severely restricts numbers of Muslims who can go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (as usual only 188 out of a quota of some 5,000 were allowed to go in December 2007).

Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse the compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience are sentenced. Mystery still surrounds the fate of a mullah, reported by a former fellow-prisoner to have arrived at a closed psychiatric hospital in the north-eastern Lebap Region in late 2006 (see F18News 4 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1057).

The government claims to be working on a new Religion Law, but no progress on this has been publicly announced (see F18News 14 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1088). (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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