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## TURKMENISTAN: Baptist Women are latest targets

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

*Two signing deaf and speech impaired Baptist women are the latest victims of Turkmenistan's campaign against religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Olga Shchedrova has been fined, had money stolen from her by officials, and suffered the same officials' attempts to humiliate her. But she still refused to deliver court summonses to other Christians. Nezire Kamalova has been threatened with 15 days' imprisonment for non-payment of a fine and her mother is now threatening to send her to non-Christian relatives in a distant village, to prevent Kamalova attending Christian services in Turkmenabad.*

Two signing deaf and speech impaired Baptist women are the latest victims of Turkmenistan's campaign against religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 18 July 2003 Olga Shchedrova was summoned to the court in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) in eastern Turkmenistan, where she was threatened with fines and imprisonment for 15 days and attempts were made to force her to deliver summonses to other Christians, which she refused to do.

On 21 July court officials took Shchedrova's passport, which they were holding, to the social security department and without her being present or giving her permission drew her pension of 300,000 manat (416 Norwegian Kroner, 51 Euros or 58 US Dollars). They withheld 255,000 in payment of her fine (the fine was 250,000) (347 Norwegian Kroner, 42 Euros or 48 US Dollars) and passed on to her 46,000 (64 Norwegian Kroner, 8 Euros or 9 US Dollars). When asked where the remaining 4,000 manat (6 Norwegian Kroner, 1 Euro or 1 US Dollar) were, the court officials replied that they had kept them for themselves. Throughout the conversation they made fun of her disability.

On 21 July, also signing deaf and speech impaired Baptist Nezire Kamalova was summoned to court as well. She was also threatened with 15 days' imprisonment if she failed to pay her fine. Kamalova's non-Christian mother accompanied her to the court and after the hearing became very hostile towards her. She paid the fine for Nazire and is now threatening to send her to non-Christian relatives in a distant village so that she will be unable to attend Christian services in Turkmenabad.

Forum 18's attempts to establish whether the authorities regarded this as normal practice in Turkmenistan were in vain. Both at the city administration and at the procuracy, officials who did not give their names hung up when Forum 18 tried to phone them on 1 August.

Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics. No faiths except for the officially-approved Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been allowed to register any communities. The government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal. Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and other Protestants, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutherans, the Jews, Hare Krishna communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and others are thus denied the opportunity of worshipping legally.

Since May 2003, pressure on religious minorities has intensified with a series of apparently coordinated raids in six different locations on various communities, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, as well as Hare Krishna communities (see F18News 10 June 2003). In all these cases, the police burst into private apartments where members of religious minorities had gathered, and took them to the police station.

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