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TURKMENISTAN: Five years' imprisonment for arrested Protestant pastor?

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

Pentecostal pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, arrested at his home in Mary in south-eastern Turkmenistan on 27 August, faces criminal charges of large-scale swindling which carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment and confiscation of property, his wife Maya and his lawyer have told Forum 18 News Service. Two women who had attended church meetings wrote statements that he took money from them, as did a man they had never heard of, charges his wife and other church members deny vigorously. They say police pressured the two women to write the statements and they now regret doing so. Another church member has been threatened that if she does not testify against Pastor Nurliev her husband – who is not a church member – will be sacked from his job. Forum 18 was unable to discuss the case with officials, including police investigator Durdimurad Gazakov. Meanwhile, mystery surrounds why two imams were arrested and given long prison terms.

Police in the town of Mary in south-eastern Turkmenistan arrested Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev on 27 August, his wife Maya and other church members told Forum 18 News Service. Investigators have accused him of swindling money from two women who attended church meetings and from a man he had never heard of before. He faces up to five years' imprisonment if convicted. Church members vigorously refute the accusations. Another church member has been summoned and threatened that if she does not testify against Pastor Nurliev, her husband will be sacked from his job in the military. "They have no conscience, no limits," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 of the officials who have arrested her husband. "What they've done is not right."

Pastor Nurliev has been accused under Article 228, Part 2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes swindling by a group of people, repeated swindling, or large-scale swindling, his lawyer told Forum 18 on 30 August. Those found guilty face punishment of between one and five years' imprisonment and possible confiscation of property. Investigators allege that Pastor Nurliev swindled the three out of 1,400 Manats (3,079 Norwegian Kroner, 387 Euros or 491 US Dollars), which they say represents large-scale swindling.

The lawyer added that investigators have up to two months to prepare a case for trial. Pastor Nurliev is currently being held in the town police investigation cells.

No official response

Forum 18 has been unable to discuss the accusations with investigator Durdimurad Gazakov, who is leading the case at the Mary town police. The man who answered his telephone on 30 August put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked for him. Subsequent calls went unanswered. Forum 18 reached town prosecutor Razmurad Durdiev the same day, but he refused to answer any questions and put the phone down.

The man who answered the telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], put the phone down on 30 August as soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered. The telephone of the Mary Region chief imam, who also heads the Mary Regional Gengeshi, went unanswered on 30 August.

Earlier harassment

Pastor Nurliev's congregation, Light to the World Pentecostal church, has faced intermittent harassment in recent years. Pastor Nurliev was fined for his religious activity in 2008. The church applied for state registration in 2007, but officials repeatedly asked for "corrections" to be made to the church's application and since the beginning of 2010 no progress on processing the application appears to have been made.

Since October 2007, Pastor Nurliev has been on the government's secret exit ban list maintained by the country's Migration Service on behalf of the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1474).

Arrest

The latest trouble for Pastor Nurliev came with his sudden arrest on the morning of 27 August. "I was out at work when the police arrested my husband, and the first I knew was when he was allowed to call me from the investigator's office," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18. She said police have refused to allow her to meet her husband. "They should have allowed me to see him." Police also refused to give her any document certifying his arrest or outlining the reasons for it.

She added that they took his certificate in preaching he gained at a Ukrainian Christian college in March 2006, refusing to allow her to take it back and give them a photocopy. He also had 150 US Dollars in his pocket when he was arrested which they have also refused to give back. "All they gave back to me were the keys to our flat," she lamented.

Maya Nurlieva said that police and the investigator have refused to discuss her husband's case with her, only directly with the lawyer.

Accusations

Pastor Nurliev is accused of swindling the money from two women who occasionally attended a women's group of his church, as well as from one man, Maya Nurlieva explained. The three wrote statements to the police denouncing Pastor Nurliev, but she insists neither of the women ever gave money to the church or to her husband. "They now regret having written these accusations, but they did so under police pressure and it is now too late." She said neither she nor her husband knew the man who had accused him.

One of the women attended three or four meetings in 2009, some of them with her mother. Both were subsequently imprisoned for causing a disturbance where they lived, but were freed from prison later that year in a prisoner amnesty. The young woman came to a few more meetings in 2010 after her release, accompanied by another young woman. Maya Nurlieva maintains that police or the MSS secret police put pressure on the two younger women to write the complaints as a basis to arrest her husband.

Human rights defenders have in other cases told Forum 18 that those who have been imprisoned are particularly vulnerable to pressure from the authorities to sign accusations prepared by officers.

Pastor Nurliev's lawyer said that as the case rests on the three accusations, it is only if they renounce their accusations that the case can stop. "None of them has done so," she told Forum 18.

"There are many people who could testify with the truth – that my husband did not extort money from anyone," Maya Nurlieva insisted to Forum 18. "He also has a secular job and so do I – our family does not live off extorted money."

She said that 15 church members who came to their Sunday service on 29 August signed an appeal to the Prosecutor's Office testifying to Pastor Nurliev's innocence.

Threats to church member

Another church member, Kristina Petrova, was summoned by the police on the afternoon of 29 August, Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18. Officers pressured her to testify against the pastor, but she refused. "They shouted at her and threatened her very crudely," Nurlieva told Forum 18. "She's just a young woman."

When Petrova refused to testify against Pastor Nurliev, she was then threatened that her husband would be sacked from his job in the military. She told the police that he is not a church member and has nothing to do with the case. "If they sack her husband, the family will have nothing to eat," Nurlieva pointed out.

Religious prisoners

Five Jehovah's Witnesses are currently serving prison sentences for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience while a further three, also prosecuted under the Criminal Code, are serving suspended sentences (see F18News 24 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1448).

Mystery surrounds the recent imprisonment of several imams – it remains unclear whether they were punished for peaceful religious activity or for other reasons. A 73-year-old imam Shiri Geldimuradov died in prison apparently in early June, Radio Free Europe and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported. He was arrested in April after the authorities claimed weapons had been found in his Ashgabad home. One of his sons had already been arrested, while three others were arrested after the imam's arrest.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights also reported on 22 August that two other imams were imprisoned in separate cases after MSS secret police claim to have found weapons on them.

One of them, an elderly imam from a village in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan, was given a five year prison term after officers who stopped his car in late June alleged they had found bullets for a Makarov pistol. By the time the case reached court, no mention was made in the case of any bullets and he was imprisoned on other charges. The other imam was imprisoned for three years after MSS secret police officers claim to have found a dummy grenade at his home. Similarly, by the time the case reached court no mention was made of any grenade.

Harassment continues

Other Protestant churches have faced recent harassment. A summer camp for young people run by several Protestant churches near Geok-tepe was raided by police in July, who questioned and threatened participants. The same month, members of a Baptist church in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] were pressured to sign statements that they would no longer attend the church. Elsewhere, two Protestant Christians were sacked from their employment because of their faith in summer 2010, one in state employment, the other in private employment (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1474). (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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

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>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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