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TURKMENISTAN: Upsurge in raids, threats, fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

At least five Protestants in Turkmenistan's Lebap Region have been given large fines for religious activity without state approval in three separate trials in late August, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. One of the trials followed a meeting where the Imam, local officials and elders summoned the village population and threatened to expel all the Protestants or ostracise them, and threatened that their children will be kept under close scrutiny in school. Elsewhere, other Protestants have been summoned and threatened, including one whose business was seized. "The situation has got markedly worse since July and we don't know why," one Protestant, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. No official was prepared to discuss the raids, threats and fines with Forum 18.

Protestant Christians have faced an upsurge since late July in raids, threats of expulsion from villages or social ostracism, threats that their children will be kept under close scrutiny in school and other harassment, Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service from Turkmenistan. At least three separate administrative trials of Protestants have taken place, leading to large fines. "The situation has got markedly worse since July and we don't know why," one Protestant, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in late August.

Several Protestants have told Forum 18 that they fear their children will face discrimination and harassment in schools, especially in rural areas. The new academic year began in Turkmenistan's schools on 1 September. "Children of believers can be singled out by head teachers and individual teachers for ridicule and can have their grades lowered because of the faith of their parents," one Protestant complained to Forum 18. The Protestant pointed to several such instances in the academic year that finished in the summer.

No official comment

Forum 18 was unable to find any official at the national level in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] prepared to comment on the raids, threats and fines. The man who answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, put the phone down on 4 September as soon as Forum 18 called. Subsequent calls went unanswered. The man who answered the phone of Fr Andrei Sapunov, a Russian Orthodox priest who is also a Gengesh Deputy Chair with nominal responsibility for Christian affairs, told Forum 18 the same day that it was a wrong number.

An official of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 4 September that its Director, Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, was not present and put the phone down. Other numbers at the Institute went unanswered. The telephones of Pirnazar Hudainazarov, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, and his Deputy Murad Atabaev went unanswered on 4 and 5 September.

Telephones at the Education Ministry went unanswered on 5 September.

An official of the Gengesh office for Lebap Region in the regional centre Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjou) refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 5 September and put the phone down. No other Lebap regional officials were prepared to discuss anything either.

Fines, threats

Three administrative trials of Protestant Christians are known to have taken place from late August in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan. All were accused of violating Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("violation of the law on religious organisations"), which carries a punishment of fines of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage for refusing to register a religious community or participating in an unregistered religious community. Fines can be doubled for repeat offenders (see Forum 18 Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

In a village in Serdarabad District, the Deputy Hyakim (administration chief) responsible for culture Almagul Nazarova, Lebap's Regional Imam Annaoraz Repov, local Imams and Aksakals (elders) summoned a meeting of all local residents. They threatened to

ostracise or expel all local Protestants. They also warned that once school resumed on 1 September, all Protestant children would be kept under special observation.

At the same time, at least four local Protestants were questioned and threatened by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police and the Police's 6th Department, which notionally counters terrorism and organised crime. Three were then accused of violating Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences. At their trial at Serdarabad District Court, all three are believed to have each been fined 400 Manats (820 Norwegian Kroner, 110 Euros or 140 US Dollars).

In Galkynysh District, two Protestants from a local village were brought to trial on 27 August at the District Court under Article 205, Protestants told Forum 18. On 31 August one was fined 750 Manats (1,540 Norwegian Kroner, 210 Euros or 265 US Dollars), while the other is also believed to have been fined. When one of the two Protestants tried to appeal against the fine, the judge who had handed down the punishment said it was impossible to appeal against it. Court executors then threatened to seize the family's property if the fine was not paid.

On 30 August, one Protestant in Turkmenabad went on trial at the City Court under Administrative Code Article 205, Protestants told Forum 18. The following day the court handed down a fine of 1,200 Manats (2,460 Norwegian Kroner, 340 Euros or 420 US Dollars).

Raids, threats

The three trials in Lebap Region come after intermittent harassment of Protestants over the spring and summer.

The state-approved Imam of Gubadag District of Dashoguz Region, who is also the District representative of the Gengesh, summoned several local Protestants to the hyakimlik (district administration) in late July, Protestants complained to Forum 18. Also present were other administration officials. "They threatened that if they continue to attend church meetings, they will be kicked out of their jobs," a Protestant told Forum 18. "If they attend for a second time, they will be imprisoned." The Protestants were summoned to the district administration again in late August.

On 25 June, police raided the home of a Protestant in Tejen, a town south-east of Ashgabad. He was at work, and only his mother was at home. When he returned that evening, he found his mother crying. "She told him men in civilian clothes had visited, gone into his room and seized seven of his Christian books, including Bibles, and asked many questions," Protestants told Forum 18. They had ordered him to come to the police station the following day to write a statement.

When the Protestant arrived at the police station on 26 June, his local police officer told him he was in trouble with the MSS secret police. An MSS officer took him into a room set up for recording, and interrogated him about his work and his religious activity. "He asked why he did not pray the namaz [Muslim prayers], adding that all young men of his age go to the mosque," Protestants told Forum 18. The Protestant responded that what he believed and what religious books he reads was his business. The MSS officer then shouted at him and threatened him.

After the interrogation, the local police officer told the Protestant that his career was at an end. Police had already summoned for questioning his business partner (the two ran a shop together that they owned). They closed down the shop after confiscating many of the goods and fittings, including telephones. "His business partner wasn't a Christian – so he suffered simply because of [the Protestant's] faith," Protestants told Forum 18. The local police officer told him that if he did not want his mother to be upset again with further questioning, he should leave the town. The Protestant did so.

Members of other Protestant communities in Tejen had already faced threats. One evening in late March, the MSS had sent a car of its officers to raid a private flat where a group of five elderly Protestant women met regularly for worship, Protestants told Forum 18. The secret police officers waited outside the block of flats until the meeting had finished before intervening. "There was no trial, but the MSS officers frightened the women so much that they stopped their meetings for worship," Protestants complained.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Turkmenistan the wife of a Protestant leader left her job as a doctor at a government clinic in a rural area early in 2012. In the summer she applied to regain it, but was told that because of her husband's position the clinic could not offer her a job. "She's a good doctor, and although clinics in rural areas find it hard to attract qualified doctors, they refused to take her back because of her husband," one Protestant told Forum 18. "This is discrimination."

Unregistered religious activity illegal

Turkmenistan has banned unregistered religious activity, in defiance of its international human rights commitments. At the same time, gaining state registration is very difficult, especially for religious communities the government does not like, such as mosques independent of the state-controlled muftiate, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Raids, threats, searches and confiscations of religious literature have occurred over many years. They have particularly affected Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses (see Forum 18 Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

However, after a raid on a small Baptist congregation in Lebap Region in April, police suddenly returned the Christian literature a month later (see F18News 17 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1733). (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=1676.

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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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