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TURKMENISTAN: Raids, fines, exit denial, bloodied hands

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

Police and other unidentified officials who raided the home of a Baptist family in the northern city of Dashoguz dragged the father of the family, 75-year-old Begjan Shirmedov, from the house by his collar and beat the hands of his 68-year-old wife until they bled, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. About 15 church members were questioned and religious literature seized. The raid came two weeks after a raid on another Protestant meeting in the city, with fines on three participants. One of those fined – Oleg Piyashev – was revisiting his homeland from Russia. A Russian and Turkmen citizen, he was banned from leaving Turkmenistan at Ashgabad airport on 23 September. The Russian Embassy told Forum 18 it is awaiting an explanation from the Turkmen Foreign Ministry.

A Turkmen-born Protestant Oleg Piyashev has been denied exit from Turkmenistan to return to his home in Russia, where he lives with his wife and family, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. He was barred exit at Ashgabad [Ashgabat] airport on 23 September, a week after he was among three Protestants fined for holding a religious meeting in the northern city of Dashoguz. In an apparently related incident, police and local officials raided a Baptist home in the city, detaining and questioning 75-year-old Baptist leader Begjan Shirmedov, beating the hands of his wife until they bled and threatening church members with prosecution.

One Protestant who knows the Shirmedov family complained of the "crude" behaviour of the officials "who violated all ethical norms" during the 23 September raid. "I am very sad that this lawless behaviour took place without regard for the individual," the Protestant, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. "They treated an elderly man like a tramp in front of his wife, his children, church members and neighbours without fear of having to answer for their actions."

The raids and fines in Dashoguz followed similar raids and fines on a number of Protestants across Turkmenistan in recent months (see F18News 5 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1737).

Forum 18 was unable to find any official at the national level in the capital Ashgabad 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 27 September as soon as Forum 18 called. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Similarly, no-one at the Dashoguz Regional Hyakimlik [administration] was available to comment. The telephone of the Hyakimlik's religious affairs department went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 27 September.

Raid, fines

Piyashev – who left Turkmenistan for Russia in 2003 and now lives in Tomsk – was on a short visit back to his homeland when he was caught in a police raid on a religious meeting in a private flat in Dashoguz on 5 September, Protestants told Forum 18. Police found an interview Piyashev had filmed with Shirmedov about Christian poetry he had written and confiscation of copies in February after the poet had sought to have a small book of them printed locally (see F18News 8 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1663).

During the raid, police took a copy of Piyashev's interview. They also brought an administrative case against Piyashev and two other local Protestants.

All three were tried at Dashoguz City Court on 14 September, where they were found guilty 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. They were each fined 750 Manats (1,500 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 260 US Dollars). Despite insisting that their meeting was not illegal, the three have all paid the fines.

No exit

Piyashev – who has both Turkmen and Russian citizenship – was due to leave Turkmenistan to return home on 23 September. Despite having a valid ticket, Migration Service officials prevented him at Ashgabad Airport from boarding his flight. They refused

to give him a reason, telling him that he should seek an explanation from the Migration Service in Dashoguz, Protestants told Forum 18.

On 24 September, once back in Dashoguz, Piyashev visited the local head of the Migration Service, who told him they had no complaints against him and that all his documents are in order. However, he told Piyashev he is "temporarily" banned from travelling. When Piyashev said that he has a Russian passport, the official responded: "A Russian passport means nothing to us."

An official of the Border Service at Ashgabad Airport told Forum 18 on 27 September that he could find no record of Piyashev among those denied the right to leave the country on 23 September. However, he said the Border Service would have no record if an individual had been denied the right to leave by the Migration Service, which operates the control before the final Border Service control.

The telephone of the Migration Service at the airport went unanswered on 27 September.

Piyashev has sought the help of the Consular Department of Russia's Embassy in Ashgabad to return home to his family in Russia, Protestants told Forum 18.

Aleksei Mosin, spokesperson for the Russian Embassy in Ashgabad, told Forum 18 that it had received an appeal for assistance in Piyashev's case. Its Consular Department had investigated and established that Piyashev has joint Turkmen and Russian citizenship.

"According to the Agreement on Settlement of Dual Citizenship Issues between Russia and Turkmenistan, while he is in Turkmenistan he is under the jurisdiction of the Turkmen authorities," Mosin told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 27 September. Since Piyashev is a Russian citizen, the Embassy requested Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry to clarify why Piyashev was denied the possibility to board the flight to Russia. "At this stage we are waiting for the response from the Turkmen side."

Violent raid

A group of about six officials – two of them in police uniforms – raided Shirmedov's Dashoguz home on Sunday 23 September. They arrived during a home meeting of his Baptist congregation, Path of Faith Church, attended by about 15 church members. Almost all those present – men, women and children – were taken in a bus to the Hyakimlik. "Begjan was dragged out of the house by his collar," one Protestant complained to Forum 18, pointing out that he is an elderly man who should be treated with more respect. They say his son Shohrat tried to protect him.

At the Hyakimlik, church members were questioned about their religious activity by Hudainazar Artykov, the deputy to Dashoguz Regional imam and state religious affairs official Rovshen Allaberdiev. Officials took fingerprints from Begjan Shirmedov and his son Shohrat "as if they were terrorists", Protestants complained to Forum 18. Later that day the church members were released.

While the group of church members were being questioned at the Hyakimlik, another group of officials searched every room in the family home. They seized Christian books, booklets and CDs.

Swearing, beating

Officials raiding the house also swore at and beat Begjan Shirmedov's 68-year-old wife Kerime (Klara) Ataeva on the hands after she complained that it was illegal to seize their literature, that they should not treat a senior citizen like her husband with such disrespect and that they were walking in her home wearing their shoes. When she complained and showed her bloodied hands to another official, he responded: "I saw nothing."

When officials asked where the literature had come from, family members insisted they had collected the books over many years as they have been Christians since the mid-1990s.

When officials told them that religious activity without state registration is illegal, church members responded that they have been seeking such registration in vain since 2004, when the registration of non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities once again became possible.

Path of Faith Church lodged registration documents in 2005, but these were rejected because of "mistakes". The Church again lodged its application in 2008, but these were returned by the Justice Ministry two years' later. It has since tried a further time to register.

The official who answered the telephone of the Justice Ministry department in Ashgabad which is supposed to register religious organisations told Forum 18 on 27 September that the line was bad and asked to call back. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

Another city, another fine

Among other Protestants to be fined in recent months was one in the capital Ashgabad, fellow Protestants told Forum 18. On 14 September, Judge S. Taylyyew of Kopetdag District Court in Ashgabad found a local Protestant guilty of violating Article 205, Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

The Protestant was accused of creating groups affiliated with an unregistered Protestant community and reading "illegal" religious literature obtained from Russia. The Judge fined the Protestant 375 Manats (750 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros or 130 US Dollars). This is about the average monthly wage of a government employee such as a teacher in the capital.

Exit denials

A number of religious believers – including former prisoners of conscience - are known to be among those to have been placed on the exit ban list. Among them is Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, leader of a Protestant church in Mary who was imprisoned from August 2010 to February 2012. He discovered he was barred from leaving in 2007, when he was taken off an aeroplane at Ashgabad Airport (see F18News 18 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1691).

Also on the exit ban list is Baptist leader Shagildy Atakov, as well as his wife, all their nine children (who range in age from 22 to 5) and his brother. Atakov was imprisoned from 1998 to 2002 to punish him for his faith. He learnt he was on the exit ban list in 2006, while his wife and children discovered this in 2008 when they were barred from leaving at Ashgabad Airport (see F18News 18 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1691).

"We have a great need to be allowed to travel," Atakov told Forum 18 from his home in the village of Kaakhka near Ashgabad on 28 August. "We need not only to travel for medical treatment but to have fellowship with other believers."

Atakov added that he has again tried to get an explanation for the exit ban from the Migration Service. "They replied most recently in the summer to say we are still banned from travelling, but again gave no reasons," he complained. (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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