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TURKMENISTAN: Multiple fines for unregistered worship meeting

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A week after their Sunday worship meeting was raided, eleven Baptists in Turkmenistan's northern city of Dashoguz were each fined two months' average wages, Protestants told Forum 18. One of those fined was a schoolboy aged 17. Two of the judges refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they had punished individuals for meeting for worship. One of the judges also refused to explain why he had imprisoned a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector in March. Meanwhile, the Turkmen authorities allowed a visiting Protestant Oleg Piyashev to return to his family in Russia after earlier blocking his departure. And it remains unclear whether any Turkmen pilgrims will be allowed to join this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which begins in late October.

Eleven members of a Baptist church in the northern city of Dashoguz were fined yesterday (1 October) for participating in an unregistered religious community, Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. Two of the judges – one of whom sent a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector to prison in March - refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they were punishing individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The fines bring to more than twenty the number of Protestants known to have been fined since the summer amid an upsurge in raids.

The victims are planning to seek the assistance of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in the Turkmen capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of further state reprisals told Forum 18. Ironically, the fines came on the day the OSCE discussed religious freedom at its Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw.

Forum 18 was unable to find any official at the national level in 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 2 October as soon as Forum 18 called. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Exit ban lifted

Meanwhile, the Turkmen authorities allowed a Turkmen-born Protestant who now lives in Russia, Oleg Piyashev, to leave the country to return to his family in Russia, fellow Protestants told Forum 18. He crossed the border from Dashoguz to Uzbekistan on 1 October, and from there flew back to Moscow, arriving in the early hours of the following morning.

Caught in a police raid on a religious meeting in a private flat in Dashoguz on 5 September while on a short return visit to his homeland, Piyashev had been among three Protestants fined on 14 September for their participation in the meeting. The Migration Service then prevented him from boarding his return flight to Russia at Ashgabad Airport on 23 September without giving any reason, despite his valid ticket (see F18News 27 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1748).

Raided

The most recent trouble for Path of Faith Church in Dashoguz came on 23 September, when their meeting in the home of the Shirmedov family was raided by police and officials of the Hyakimlik (administration). About 15 church members were taken away for questioning, while officials seized all the Christian literature in the house that they could find. The mother of the family, 68-year-old Kerime (Klara) Ataeva, who stayed behind at the house while the others were questioned, had her hands beaten until they bled (see F18News 27 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1748).

Eleven church members – including most of those taken away for questioning, as well as Ataeva – received a written summons to appear at the police station on 1 October. "No one told them they were going to face trial, but when they got to the police station they were then taken to Dashoguz City Court," Protestants told Forum 18.

The eleven were tried separately by three different judges in hearings that lasted about 15 minutes each. "Church members wanted to be present for the trials, but at each one there was only the judge, the one defendant and a police officer," Protestants told Forum 18. "Questions were all about why they believe, why they had abandoned Islam, where did they get their Christian books from and why they didn't go to a registered religious community. No one listened when they said they had repeatedly lodged registration

applications."

All eleven 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). This represents about two months' average wage in Dashoguz for those with work.

"The verdicts state that the fines cannot be appealed," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "Church members insist they were doing nothing wrong and want to challenge the verdicts. But they have no lawyer and doubt that any lawyer would be brave enough to help them. That's why they intend to appeal to the OSCE Centre."

No comment

Eight of those fined were from the Shirmedov family, the youngest a schoolboy of just 17. "They have never been fined for their religious activity before," Protestants told Forum 18.

The church's leader, 75-year-old Begjan Shirmedov, his wife Ataeva, as well as their son Shohrat, were fined by Judge Geldimurat Roziev. He had sentenced Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Zafar Abdullaev to two years' imprisonment on 6 March (see F18News 18 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1691).

Judge Roziev listened as Forum 18 explained who was calling, then refused to discuss the fines on the Protestants or the imprisonment of Abdullaev. "We don't give information by telephone," he insisted on 2 October. "Come here to the court and you can collect a copy of the verdicts."

At least some of the others were fined by Judge Italmaz Bayhanov. However, he was equally unprepared to discuss the fines. "If they're unhappy with the decision, let them come here," he told Forum 18 from the court the same day. He then put the phone down.

More threats

On 2 October, some church members went to the religious affairs department of the Hyakimlik to try to have the fines overturned. They met the head of the department, Regional Imam Rovshen Allaberdiev, and his deputy, Hudainazar Artykov. Protestants told Forum 18 Artykov appears to have been the one to initiate the 23 September raid and the subsequent punishments. "The police and other officials all listened when he gave orders," they noted.

After the church members showed them the verdicts handing down the fines and pointed out how difficult many of those fined would face in paying, Artykov appeared unmoved. He again threatened church members.

How many haj pilgrims?

Although the haj pilgrimage to Mecca is expected this year to be between 24 and 29 October, Forum 18 has been unable to find out how many pilgrims the Turkmen authorities will allow to travel. A presidential decree is usually issued several weeks before the start of the haj, with the one state-sponsored aeroplane of pilgrims normally flying from Ashgabad to Saudi Arabia a week before the start of the haj itself. However, no public announcement for this year's haj appears to have been made by 2 October.

The repeated refusal of Nursakhatov, the Deputy Chair of the Gengesh, to answer any questions has prevented Forum 18 from finding out from him.

The woman who answered the phone of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad on 5 September suggested that Forum 18 could send a written question to the Consular Department. Forum 18 wrote that same day to ask what quota the Saudi authorities assigned to Turkmenistan, how many pilgrims were expected to travel this year and whether pilgrims can travel on the haj independently or only as part of the state-sponsored group. However, no reply had been received by 2 October.

The government normally allows only one airliner of people (normally 188 people) a year to go on the haj, out of a possible Saudi Arabian-allocated quota of about 5,000. The 188 people include MSS secret police officers. In 2009, the government allowed no haj pilgrims to travel at all. The total for the November 2011 haj – just 186 – was the lowest figure (apart from 2009) since 2002 (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

A religious affairs official in Mary Region admitted to Forum 18 in August that "thousands" of people are in the queue in his Region alone for a place on the haj, whose numbers are severely restricted by the government. Those who may be selected from Mary Region are among those who lodged applications in 2004 or 2005. "We check first to make sure they are still alive," the official told Forum 18 (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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