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TURKMENISTAN: Continuing haj restrictions, increasing raids on Christians, religious freedom prisoners of conscience remain jailed

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Turkmenistan continues to allow only 188 pilgrims, including MSS secret police officers, to take part in the annual Muslim haj pilgrimage. The imam of a large mosque, unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 News Service that they were not aware of any Muslims who thought it possible to ask for an increase in permitted haj numbers. In mid-October a school teacher in northern Turkmenistan, also unnamed for fear of state reprisals, was interrogated and threatened by the MSS secret police. Protestants in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18. The MSS wanted to know whether the teacher believes in Jesus, and which Christians they know. The interrogation of and threats to the teacher come at a time of heightened raids and pressure, particularly on Protestant Christians. Five Jehovah's Witnesses and an unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience, all jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, were not included in the latest prisoner amnesty. And former Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev's attempt to clear his name has been rejected in a "damaged and opened" official letter, Forum 18 has been told.

Turkmenistan is continuing to allow only one government-sponsored aeroplane of government-approved pilgrims to take part in the annual Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov signed a decree authorising 188 pilgrims to travel in a state sponsored group, the government website noted on 5 October. Those chosen gathered at the Ertogrul Gazy mosque in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 16 October, together with officials from various state agencies, for a final briefing. They flew to Saudi Arabia the following day on a Boeing 757 airliner of the government-run Turkmenistan Airlines.

The continued haj restrictions come at a time of increasing pressure and raids on Protestant Christians, and as the government did not include prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief in the latest prisoner amnesty.

The haj pilgrimage is an obligation for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford it at least once in their lifetime. The seating in a Boeing 757 airliner is typically arranged to carry more than 188 passengers, so the government is not even allowing one full airliner of pilgrims to travel.

Who is allowed on the haj?

The imam of a large mosque in a location distant from Ashgabad, unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 News Service on 31 October that no-one from his mosque went on the haj this year. The imam had heard that some people from Ashgabad had gone on the state-controlled pilgrimage, but did not think it was possible to travel independently. He was not aware of any imams or other Muslims who thought it was possible to ask the government for an increase in the numbers allowed to make the haj.

The selection of pilgrims is tightly controlled, involving interlocking controls by the MSS secret police, the state Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, the state-run Muftiate (Sunni Muslim Spiritual Administration), regional government administrations, and the central government. The government claims that independent travel on the haj is possible, "but in practice the Saudi Arabian Embassy won't give them a visa unless they are on the list approved by the Turkmen authorities. They refuse them on various pretexts", an Ashgabad resident told Forum 18 in 2010, commenting that the Saudi Arabian Embassy appears to follow the wishes of the Turkmen authorities (see F18News 19 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1500).

Forum 18 has been repeatedly told that among the 188 pilgrims routinely sent are agents of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, to monitor and control those travelling. Turkmenistan is thought to have been allocated an annual haj quota by the Saudi Arabian authorities of around 5,000 pilgrims. However this has not been filled due to the authorities' attempts to isolate their citizens. Indeed, in 2009 no pilgrims at all were allowed to travel, allegedly owing to the H1N1 virus (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

Forum 18 sent a written enquiry to the Consular Department of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad on 5 September, asking what Turkmenistan's haj quota is and whether the Embassy grants visas to any pilgrims apart from those in the state-sponsored group. However, as of 30 October it had received no response. Embassy officials refused to give this information by telephone.

Since the 1990s, the government has allowed only one state-sponsored aeroplane of pilgrims each year and banning pilgrims from travelling independently. Between 2005 and 2008, and again in 2010 and 2011, only 188 people – including MSS secret police agents – were allowed to travel (see F18News 22 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1616).

Even for those who do manage to get a place on the haj, there are restrictions in addition to the presence of MSS secret police. No Shia Muslim rituals are permitted (ethnic Turkmen Muslims tend to be Sunni), and going on the haj appears to entail a subsequent obligation to publicly support the state (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

Unable to say how many pilgrims

The telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 30 October.

The official who answered the phone at the Gengesh for Mary Region in the south-east of the country told Forum 18 the same day that it was unable to say how many pilgrims from that Region had travelled on this year's haj. He also cannot say in what year they had first applied. "The regional mufti Bazar Hojaev is not here and we can't answer any questions," the official told Forum 18.

An official of the Gengesh for Mary Region told Forum 18 in August that his office was then processing haj applications lodged by would-be pilgrims in 2004 and 2005. "Well, there's a queue," he explained (see F18News 17 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1733).

Telephones of other Regional offices of the Gengesh went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 30 October.

Letter of recommendation from imam now required

Local journalist Atajan Akyev, writing on the website news-asia.ru on 19 October, noted the many would-be pilgrims who are denied the opportunity to join the haj because of the state restrictions. There are also "the compulsory instruction on observing the general rules of conduct during the haj", he noted.

One middle-aged Muslim, who asked that their real name not be given, told Akyev that would-be pilgrims tried to use any influential contacts they have to secure a place. The Muslim lodged an application in 2003 and has not yet gone.

Akyev notes that in previous years it was possible for individuals who do not regularly attend mosque to get on the list. However, this has changed. "If a person does not go to mosque and does not pray the namaz, consideration of any application will be put off to an indeterminate point in the future."

In a new development this year, Akyev quoted relatives of those on this year's haj as saying that the Gengesh demanded a letter of recommendation from the local imam for each applicant.

Teacher questioned, threatened

In mid-October, a school teacher in a village in northern Turkmenistan was visited by three officers of the MSS secret police. The teacher was summoned from the classroom to be interrogated, Protestants in Turkmenistan told Forum 18, asking that the teacher and the location not be identified.

Officers shouted and swore at the teacher, Protestants complained. They asked whether the teacher believes in Jesus, as well as which Christians the teacher knows. They also asked about whether the teacher attends weddings. Protestants say this was to find out if the teacher is a Jehovah's Witness, as Jehovah's Witnesses are known for refusing wedding invitations.

Mounting pressure

The interrogation of and threats to the teacher come at a time of heightened pressure, particularly on Protestants. Communities in various parts of Turkmenistan have been raided since the summer and more than 20 Protestants are known to have been fined for their religious activity.

Among them were eleven members of a Baptist church in the northern city of Dashoguz, fined on 1 October for 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 (see F18News 2 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1749),

Those fined in Dashoguz have been paying the fines in instalments, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state

reprisals told Forum 18. The final instalments are due to be handed over by 2 November.

Amnesty – but not for religious freedom prisoners of conscience

President Berdimukhamedov signed a decree amnestying prisoners "in connection with the principles of mercy and humanism" to mark Turkmenistan's Independence Day, the government website noted on 23 October. Officials say more than 2,000 prisoners were to be freed, including 11 foreigners.

However, the amnesty does not include any prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, including conscientious objection to military service.

The four current imprisoned conscientious objectors – all Jehovah's Witnesses - are: Mahmud Hudaybergenov, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, August 2011; Zafar Abdullaev, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, March 2012; Navruz Nasyrlyayev, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, May 2012; and Juma Nazarov, 18 months, Ashgabad Court, July 2012.

Hudaybergenov and Abdullaev are being held in the general regime section of Seydi Labour Camp, while Nasyrlyayev is being held in the Camp's strict regime section. It is not known if Nazarov has also been transferred to the Seydi Labour Camp.

Also imprisoned is Jehovah's Witness Aibek Salayev, convicted in Dashoguz on 12 April of "distributing pornography" and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. He is also being held in Seydi Labour Camp.

In addition, other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are serving suspended sentences (see F18News 17 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1733).

There are also an unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience also jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Musa (last name unknown), a Muslim from Ashgabad who seems to have been imprisoned for teaching the Koran to children, was being held in Seydi Labour Camp at the beginning of 2012 (see F18News 20 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1669).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 30 October that none of their prisoners are known to have been included in the Independence Day amnesty, just as none had been included in the previous prisoner amnesty in August.

Attempt to clear name fails

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev has failed in his attempt to clear his name. He has appealed to the Supreme Court repeatedly since his release from Ovadan-Depe Prison on 17 May under amnesty and his return to Ashgabad.

Arrested in November 2011, Nuryllayev was sentenced on 18 January 2012 to four years' imprisonment on charges of "spreading pornography". He has consistently maintained his innocence (see F18News 28 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1706).

On 10 October, Begench Hojamguliev, deputy chair of Turkmenistan's Supreme Court, wrote to Nuryllayev to tell him that it had rejected his supervisory appeal. Nearly two weeks later the "damaged and opened" letter reached Nuryllayev, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "No hearing even took place," they lamented.

On 22 October, M. Saryyeva, head of the Department for Supervising the Legality of Court decisions, wrote to Nuryllayev insisting that the court case and sentencing had all been conducted legally. Unlike the Supreme Court letter, this one arrived three days later.

No further appeals possible

The man who answered Hojamguliev's phone at the Supreme Court on 30 October initially said he was Hojamguliev. However, when Forum 18 asked about Nuryllayev's case he said he was not Hojamguliev, adding that he had no information on the case. "Who gave you my number?" the man asked Forum 18. "We're not allowed to say anything to anyone."

"We believe Vladimir now has no other possibilities for further appeals," Jehovah's Witnesses lamented to Forum 18.

Under the terms of Nuryllayev's amnesty, he has to report to his local police station each Sunday, as well as weekly to the local police officer. The authorities may have chosen Sunday to obstruct Nuryllayev meeting for worship with his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. (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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