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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

20 December 2013

TURKMENISTAN: "Singing about God here is banned"

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

Police and MSS secret police in Dashoguz in Turkmenistan have raided members of Light of the East Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two homes of church members were raided and religious literature including personal Bibles were seized. One church member was threatened with a 15-day jail term and deportation, even though he is a Turkmen citizen. During one raid, on a rehearsal of songs for the following Sunday's meeting for worship, officials stated that "singing about God here is banned". The Church was also threatened that it might lose its state registration, thus making it illegal. A state religious affairs official who is also an imam told the church's Pastor Yuri Rozmetov that the Christian faith "is wrong" and pressured him to become a Muslim. Meanwhile, the level of fines to punish individuals and communities for exercising their freedom of religion or belief has been increased. And the state continues to limit the total number of Muslims allowed to take part in the annual haj pilgrimage to 188 people including MSS secret police. Officials have refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police in Turkmenistan's northern city of Dashoguz [Dasoguz] have raided and threatened members of the local Pentecostal Light of the East Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two homes of church members were raided and religious literature was seized from both. One church member was threatened with a 15-day prison term and deportation, even though he is a Turkmen citizen. A state religious affairs official who is also an imam told the church's Pastor his Christian faith "is wrong" and to become a Muslim. Local Protestants expressed concern to Forum 18 about the raids and continuing pressure on church members.

Light of the East Church gained state registration in April 2005, one of very few non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities to gain state permission to exist outside the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Meanwhile, the level of fines to punish individuals and communities for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief has been increased, with the announcement of new base units used to calculate fines from 1 January 2014 under the new Code of Administrative Offences (see below).

The raids and threats came as an 11th known prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief was imprisoned. Suhrab Rahmanberdiyyev became the ninth known jailed conscientious objector to military service when he was given an 18-month prison term on 18 November. Known freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience are nine Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors and a Protestant and a Jehovah's Witness jailed for other freedom of religion or belief-related reasons (see F18News 20 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1910).

"We don't answer to you"

Officials refused to explain why religious communities are raided and threatened, and why religious literature is confiscated, as happened with Light of the East Church members in Dashoguz.

The man who on 20 December answered the telephone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered. The telephone of the Gengesh in Dashoguz – whose officials had taken part in threatening Light of the East church members - went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 17 and 20 December.

The Gengesh's main role is restricting people of all beliefs' exercise of freedom of religion or belief. As part of that role Gengesh officials are appointed by the state to be leaders of the Islamic community, including imams (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

The duty officer at Dashoguz Police referred Forum 18 to the city police chief, whom he would not name. However, his assistant claimed to Forum 18 on 19 December that he was not in the office.

Orazgeldy Orazgeldiyev, head of the secretariat of Dashoguz Police, refused to explain why local police officers had taken part in

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raiding and threatening church members and seizing religious literature. "We don't answer to you," he told Forum 18 on 20 December. He then put the phone down.

First raid

On the afternoon of 12 November, Light of the East Church member Ilkham Saidov was summoned to the Dashoguz MSS secret police. "They insisted it was urgent," Protestants complained to Forum 18. Once there, he was questioned by MSS officers and by Hudainazar Artykov, Deputy Head of Dashoguz Region Gengesh for Religious Affairs. "They shouted at him and threatened him. They even accused him of preaching to another person 15 years ago."

After interrogation, Saidov was taken home. However, five or six police arrived to search the family home that evening at about 9 pm. They searched the home without a warrant, confiscating about 500 religious books – including Bibles in Turkmen and Uzbek. They demanded that he write a statement and threatened him with 15 days' imprisonment.

They also threatened to deport him from Turkmenistan, even though he is a Turkmen citizen. International law does not allow individuals to be deported from their own country.

Over the next days, Saidov tried to get his literature back and officials promised it would be returned. However, he was again summoned to the MSS secret police several days later, where Artykov was present once more. Saidov was told his religious books would not be returned. He was threatened with a beating and having his government supply of free electricity and salt – which everyone in Turkmenistan gets - cut off.

Second raid, "singing about God here is banned"

Later in November Dashoguz police raided another private home of a family which belongs to Light of the East Church. Ashgabad-based human rights defender Natalya Shabunts, in an article published in the exile Chronicles of Turkmenistan news website on 5 December, condemned the raid as "illegal".

At mid-morning on 21 November, four men burst into the home of church member Mahmud Ovezov without permission or a search warrant. Several church members, including the Pastor Yuri Rozmetov, had gathered to rehearse music they were due to sing at their next meeting for Sunday worship on 24 November.

"Without identifying themselves and without showing any documents, the intruders began to ask the home owner and his guests on what basis they had gathered," Shabunts noted. When the church members responded that they had gathered not for a prayer meeting but to practice songs in which they "praise God", the plain-clothed men told them: "Singing about God here is banned."

Church members recognised one of the intruders as Tirkish Goshaevich from the local Hyakimlik (administration). However, the others repeatedly refused to identify themselves, saying only that they were employees of the "law-enforcement agencies".

Without drawing up any documents, the intruders seized the hymn books church members were using for their rehearsal, human rights defender Shabunts stated. The officials also ordered the church members to come with them, though they would not say where they were going.

"You should believe correctly"

Officers took the church members in an unmarked car to the Gengesh of Dashoguz Regional Hyakimlik. Pastor Rozmetov was taken to a Gengesh official who identified himself as an imam, though he would not give his name nor identify the mosque where he serves.

In each of Turkmenistan's Regions, the Gengesh is headed by the regional Imam, who is himself appointed and removed by the state (see eg. F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

The state religious affairs official who is also an imam insisted to Pastor Rozmetov that "the Christian religion is wrong", "it is not a religion but a myth", "for centuries the fact that Christ had a wife Mary has been suppressed", and "you should believe correctly and go to the mosque".

Hyakimlik officials had prepared statements on a computer and printed them out for church members to sign, human rights defender Shabunts stated. The statements were in Turkmen, which the church members do not understand or do not understand well. Church members signed the statements under pressure.

Officials threatened the church members that if "more than two" of them gather anywhere apart from the legal address of the church in its registration documents, their state registration will be cancelled and the private homes of Pastor Rozmetov and the Ovezov family will be seized.

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All unregistered religious activity is, against human rights obligations, illegal in Turkmenistan (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

More threats, personal Bibles confiscated

At 2 pm, the church members were freed, apart from Ovezov. Two officers took him back to his flat, where three women who had been left were pressured to sign pre-prepared statements. When they refused, officers threatened to take them as well to "take statements".

All those still present – including Ovezov's two sons, one aged ten, the other aged five – were put up against the wall and photographed.

The officers then demanded that the family hand over religious literature "voluntarily" if they did not want it to be found in a search, human rights defender Shabunts stated. Officers took three personal Russian-language Bibles without giving any confiscation record, against published Turkmen law.

Instruction on unregistered religious meetings

On 3 December, Pastor Rozmetov received an anonymous call demanding that those who had been detained on 21 November come to the Regional Justice Department. An official who identified herself only as Maral told them that an instruction had arrived from the Justice Ministry to deal with unregistered religious meetings. She noted that the Turkmen-language statements they had signed declared that they had taken part not in a rehearsal but in a religious meeting.

The church members angrily responded that this was not what had happened and complained about the police and Hyakimlik officials' behaviour. "Where is your evidence?" Maral asked them. The church members were then required to write new statements, this time in Russian and written by themselves.

The church members were again warned strictly that if they meet away from the church's legally-registered address, registration will be stripped from the church. "Now members of Light of the East Church are very worried by the authorities' actions and fear that any family celebration could be an interpreted as an illegal religious meeting," Shabunts noted.

No one at the Justice Ministry was prepared to tell Forum 18 on 18 December whether it had issued an instruction to local Justice Departments to take action against unregistered religious meetings.

Even though it has registration and so state permission to exist, unlike many other churches including in Dashoguz, Light of the East Church has previously been targeted by state officials. In 2010 a young people's camp it organised with the also state-registered Word of Life Church in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew) was raided. Participants – particularly ethnic Turkmens - were arrested, insulted, threatened and had personal Bibles confiscated (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1474). Similarly, Pastor Rozmetov and his mother were detained and interrogated after a police raid on a birthday party (see F18News 1 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1401).

New fines set

Meanwhile, new punishments for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief under the new Code of Administrative Offences have now been set. The new Code – approved on 29 August - comes into force on 1 January 2014 (see F18News 17 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1877).

President Berdymukhamedov signed a decree on 29 November confirming the Cabinet of Ministers' decision to set the base unit for fines from 1 January 2014 at 100 Manats (about 215 Norwegian Kroner, 25 Euros, or 35 US Dollars). The decree was published the same day in official newspapers.

The base unit for fines is currently 300 Manats, a figure set in 2010. Fines in recent years to punish people for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have generally been 750 Manats, as was given to a Baptist in Mary in July in punishment for holding a church children's summer camp (see F18News 29 August 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1869).

The new Article 76, Part 1 punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducted religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance" with a fine on individuals of 1 to 2 base units, on officials of 2 to 5 base units and on legal organisations of 5 to 10 base units.

Fines for first "offences" for individuals will thus be between 100 and 200 Manats (about 215 to 430 Norwegian Kroner, 25 to 50 Euros, or 35 to 70 US Dollars). Fines on organisations will be 500 to 1,000 Manats (about 1,000 to 2,000 Norwegian Kroner, 130 to

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260 Euros, or 175 to 350 US Dollars).

Second "offences" within one year will carry fines of up to 1,000 Manats and, for organisations, an additional ban of up to six months.

The new Article 76, Part 5 punishes "carrying out by a religious organisation of activity not envisaged by its statute, as well as violating the procedure established in law for instructing children in religious belief" with a fine on officials of up to 4 base units and on legal organisations of up to 10 base units.

This means that a religious community which conducts any activity not specifically listed in its statute could be fined up to 1,000 Manats (about 2,000 Norwegian Kroner, 260 Euros, or 350 US Dollars).

The new Article 77, Part 1 punishes "refusal to register a religious organisation as well as leadership of the activity of liquidated religious organisations as well as religious organisations whose activity has been halted" with fines of 5 to 10 base units.

Fines for this will thus be between 500 and 1,000 Manats.

Haj restrictions once again

Once again in 2013, the Turkmen authorities severely restricted the number of Muslim pilgrims who could travel on the haj to Mecca. State media said only 188 pilgrims travelled to Saudi Arabia for the pilgrimage in October.

Out of a reported quota of 5,000 granted by the Saudi authorities, the government normally allows only one airliner of people (normally 188 people) a year to go on the haj. This total includes MSS secret police officers. In 2009, the government allowed no haj pilgrims to travel at all. The severe restrictions mean that individuals have to join long waiting lists (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676). (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.

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