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TURKMENISTAN: Raids, searches, fines, threats, beatings, headscarf bans

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

Protestant women celebrating Christmas are the latest victims of police raids on worship meetings. Officers searched the home, seized telephones, forced the women to write statements and took photos and fingerprints. Officials often summon and threaten people known to be religious (including men who attend mosque, women who wear headscarves, and Jehovah's Witnesses). Eight Jehovah's Witnesses were fined in 2019.

Police raided a Christmas gathering of Protestant women in a village in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region on 26 December 2019. Officers searched the home, seized telephones and questioned the women at the police station. In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints.

It appears that none of the Protestants have yet been fined (see below).

Although this is the only known raid on Protestant Christians in 2019, throughout the year police also raided Jehovah's Witness meetings, interrogated and threatened individuals and brought cases to court. Incidents included police physical violence, intimidation, house searches (often without a warrant) and seizures of personal belongings. "Officers harass, interrogate and pressure Jehovah's Witnesses, even threatening to 'arrange an accident' if they will not renounce their faith," they told Forum 18 (see below).

At least 8 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been fined several days' average wages while one of them was also jailed for three days on accusations of hooliganism (see below).

Officials forcibly took some Jehovah's Witnesses from their workplace or homes for interrogation, "all in an effort to pressure them to abandon their faith" (see below).

One Jehovah's Witness fined in 2019 was Arslan Begenchov. Police summoned him just weeks after he completed a one-year prison term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience (see below).

In late 2019, authorities in Mary Region east of Ashgabat stepped up a campaign against women who choose to wear the hijab headscarf. While earlier it was almost impossible for women with state jobs to wear a hijab, the ban was then extended to women on the streets and at markets (see below).

Police and secret police officers have long threatened women who wear the hijab, men who have beards, and those who regularly attend prayers at the mosque (see below).

An individual returning to Turkmenistan through Ashgabat Airport was stopped after being suspected of travelling abroad for religious purposes, beaten on the head after refusing to allow a search of electronic devices (which police seized and searched) and was kept under surveillance for the following weeks (see below).

No official has been prepared to answer Forum 18's questions on why Turkmenistan does not implement its binding international human rights law obligations on freedom of religion and belief, and instead punishes individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion and belief (see below).

Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief

Turkmenistan imposes tight state controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief

(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). Only approved activity in approved locations by approved religious communities are allowed. Unregistered religious activity is banned and punishable.

All religious literature is under tight state control and unapproved distribution of such literature is punishable. Sharing of faith is

banned and punishable.

The regime arbitrarily denies registration to communities it does not like. Only mosques subject to the state-controlled Muftiate (led by Chief Mufti Yalkab Hojagulyyev) are allowed to exist. Only a small number of non-Muslim communities are allowed to register, while many (particularly Protestant communities outside the capital Ashgabat, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses) have had registration applications rejected.

Jehovah's Witnesses say that since September 2018, government interference with their religious activity has increased. They complain of police harassment and threats, police interference with the public manifestation of belief, government denial of the right to possess religious material and government denial of registration. They also complain that the international Jehovah's Witness website jw.org is blocked in Turkmenistan.

No answers

The man who answered the phone on 16 January of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev hung up as soon as Forum 18 began introducing itself.

Ishan Orazov, who works in the office of Deputy Foreign Minister Vepa Hajiyevev, told Forum 18 on 16 January he was unable to transfer the call to Hajiyevev. Hajiyevev often defends Turkmenistan's human rights record in the United Nations human rights bodies, and has apparently been part of the process of deciding which religious communities are given state permission to exist (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2323). He also spoke at a November 2019 Ashgabat roundtable allegedly on freedom of conscience (see below). Orazov declined to comment and asked for questions to be sent to Hajiyevev in writing.

Forum 18 asked Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyevev in writing the same day why individuals continue to face punishment for exercising freedom of religion or belief. He was also asked: why individuals face police and secret police interrogation, threats and torture, fines or jailing (often with long sentences); why the state bans the exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244); why the state censors religious literature and websites; and why conscientious objectors are jailed and why no alternative service has been introduced (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2522). Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Ashgabat.

The telephone of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 16 January.

Raids on worship meetings

A group of Protestant women gathered to celebrate Christmas in the evening of 26 December 2019 in a home in a village in the eastern Lebap Region, fellow Protestants told Forum 18. Police arrived and searched the home and seized the women's phones before taking the women to the police station. They were held there for some time for interrogation.

In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one. "They questioned them, forced them to write statements, took fingerprints and photos, threatened them and then returned their phones, before letting them go," one Protestant told Forum 18.

None of the Protestant women appear to have been fined.

On 2 October 2019, police officers raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness in Seydi, Lebap Region, during a religious meeting, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Officers took a group of attendees to the police station, where they interrogated and photographed them.

The police officers twisted the hands of the host, took him back to his house, searched his property, and seized his personal literature, his laptop, and his daughters' exercise books. The Jehovah's Witnesses, including the young children, were detained at the police station for six hours, from 9:00 pm till 3:00 am.

On 24 October 2019, police in Ashgabat raided a Jehovah's Witness religious meeting. Officers took all those present to the police station, interrogated them and photographed them.

The man who answered the phone of the head of Ashgabat's Police 6th Department, which supposedly counters serious crime but also punishes the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, put the phone down on 16 January as soon as Forum 18 began asking about raids, detentions and house searches.

Punished for being religious

Police and secret police officers often summon, interrogate or threaten individuals known to be religious. Officers often seize property and arrange for individuals to be fined in court.

Officials in 2019 often charged individual Jehovah's Witnesses under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), particularly Part 1. In earlier years, members of other religious communities have been fined under Article 76.

Administrative Code 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 (each base unit is 100 Manats). (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2320)

Each 100 Manats is equivalent to three days' average wage for those in formal work. However, for pensioners or others without a formal job, fines can represent a severe burden.

On 5 February 2019, a Jehovah's Witness in Balkanabat, Balkan Region, was summoned to the office of the head of her daughter's school, School No. 12. In the office, a police officer criticised her religious beliefs and threatened to fine her 3,000 Manats (about six weeks' average wages for those in formal work). The officer ordered the mother to stop teaching her child her religious beliefs and photographed the mother and daughter.

On 8 February 2019, a village official in Charjew District, Lebap Region, alleged that a complaint had been received and escorted a Jehovah's Witness to the police station, where several law enforcement officers were waiting, including a district inspector and a criminal investigation officer. The officers interrogated the Jehovah's Witness and then took him to his home and searched it, seizing personal belongings. They took him back to the police station and then threatened to push a pole with the national flag attached down his throat in an attempt to force him to kiss the flag. On 15 March, Charjew District Court fined the man 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1, and his computer and phone were confiscated. The Jehovah's Witness filed a complaint against the officers, but received no response.

Telephones at Charjew District Police went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 16 January.

On 18 February 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat, Lebap Region, raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property, seized her personal literature and passport and escorted her to the police station, where three police officers interrogated her. On 15 March, a police officer entered her home through a window and forcibly took her to Turkmenabat Court. The court fined her 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1. On 16 April, she filed a complaint with Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office against the officers' actions. The Prosecutor's Office responded that the officers had committed no offence. On 25 April, she filed a complaint with Lebap Regional Court. She received no response.

On 23 February 2019, police in Charjew District, Lebap Region, summoned Arslan Begenchov (a conscientious objector who finished his prison term in January 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2443)) to Charjew District Police Station and questioned him about his religious beliefs. After interrogation, the officer took Begenchov to his home, seized his electronic tablet and personal notebook and took him back to the police station. On 10 May, Charjew District Court fined Begenchov 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1. On 20 May, he appealed against the decision. On 24 May, Charjew District Court responded, claiming that he had missed the deadline for lodging an appeal.

On 11 March 2019, an Interior Ministry employee and another man forcibly took a Jehovah's Witness from his Ashgabat workplace to Kopetdag District Police Station No. 1 and reported that he was suspected of being a thief. At the station, officers questioned the Jehovah's Witness about his religious beliefs and seized his electronic tablet. On 12 March, Kopetdag District Court sentenced the man to three days' imprisonment under Administrative Code Article 345 ("Petty hooliganism"). On 15 March, the Witness was summoned to the Department of Religious Affairs for questioning. On 4 April, Kopetdag District Court fined him 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 for distributing religious material.

On 26 June 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat raided the home of an elderly Jehovah's Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property and seized her personal literature. That same day, the woman filed a complaint with Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office. The Prosecutor's Office later responded that the arguments in the complaint were not confirmed.

On 8 August 2019, a female Jehovah's Witness doctor was called to a meeting at Dashoguz Regional Health Administration, along with several managers. At the meeting, a police officer shouted at the doctor, claiming that she associated with a "sect" and carried on a "propaganda campaign" among residents. The officer interrogated her, photographed her, and threatened to "arrange an accident" if she would not renounce her faith.

On 26 August 2019, Ashgabat police summoned a Jehovah's Witness to the police station. The officers interrogated her, photographed her, searched her belongings and seized her personal literature. That same day, police officers arrived at the home of another elderly Jehovah's Witness, interrogated her about her religious beliefs and searched her home without a search warrant. On 4 October, Kopetdag District Court ordered that both women's personal literature be confiscated and imposed fines of 200 Manats and 100 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1.

On 13 September 2019, Ashgabat police summoned a Jehovah's Witness to the police station. Police officers interrogated her about her religious beliefs and threatened her with a search and imprisonment.

On 1 October 2019, police officers in Charjew District, Lebap Region, detained the mother of a Jehovah's Witness and interrogated her for three hours. The officers seized her passport, saying that they would return it to her only if her son came to police station. They also threatened to imprison her son.

Intrusive questioning for praying regularly

In September 2019, Mary Region secret police officers summoned a 50-year-old man "because he was religious and prays the namaz", Radio Free Europe's correspondent in Mary noted on 18 September 2019. "I told them I pray the namaz. They said they know about that," the man told the correspondent. Officers were also interested to know if Muslims drink alcohol or soft drinks.

Other questions secret police officers asked local Muslims, especially those who pray regularly at the mosque, were: "Where did you learn to pray?"; "What books do you read?"; "Where did you get your prayer books?"; and "Who are your friends?"

"I told them I bought the prayer books at the market," one Muslim man told RFE's correspondent, "received religious education by attending the mosque and listening to other believers talking, and that most of my friends are my former schoolmates, but they don't pray the namaz."

However, the secret police summoned this Muslim again. "At the second interrogation they asked me who I get together with to pray the namaz in my free time. I said I don't get together with anyone to pray the namaz. But they asked if I don't get together with anyone else, what do I do. I said that I repair houses." Officers also wanted to know if the man's wife and children also pray.

One officer then said they had no more questions, and gave the Muslim his phone number asking him to call if he learns of anyone "acting suspiciously from a religious perspective".

Questioned, punished for sharing faith

Individuals who share their faith with others risk detention and possible punishment. However, Jehovah's Witnesses say that in 2019, there were fewer incidents where police detained individuals while they were talking to others about their beliefs.

Muslims too have been seen in Ashgabat sharing their faith on the streets, Turkmen.news noted on 17 October 2019.

On 19 March 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat, Lebap Region, detained two Jehovah's Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them and seized their electronic devices. On 20 March, Turkmenabat City Court fined each of them 500 Manats and ordered that their phones be confiscated. On 9 April, Lebap Regional Court upheld the decision.

On 6 July 2019, police officers in Bayramaly, Mary Region, detained two Jehovah's Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them, and threatened to imprison them for 15 days.

On 24 September 2019, Ashgabat police escorted a Jehovah's Witness to the police station after she spoke about her faith with a woman. At the station, the officers photographed her. On 24 October, she filed a complaint with Ashgabat Prosecutor's Office against the officers' actions. She received no response.

Campaign against hijabs steps up

In early December 2019, the authorities particularly in Mary Region east of Ashgabat stepped up their campaign against women wearing the hijab headscarf, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 6 December 2019. Almost no women were seen on the streets or in the markets wearing a hijab.

Although the local authorities had long imposed a ban on women wearing the hijab, the ban had mainly affected women in state jobs or in businesses. However, in late 2019 the ban was extended to all public places.

The new ban had been given verbally, and police then questioned and threatened women they caught still wearing the hijab.

"If women wanted to continue working, they should not wear the hijab," Radio Free Europe's correspondent noted, "otherwise they'll be approached and questioned. One woman said she had been asked if she is a Wahhabi. When she denied this, saying that she was a Muslim, the state security officer questioning her responded that wearing a hijab is not obligatory."

The authorities in Mary Region and elsewhere have long waged campaigns against men wearing beards. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

"State security officers summon for questioning men for having a beard, and women for wearing a hijab," Radio Free Europe's correspondent added. "In addition, men working in state institutions can be sacked for praying the namaz. Because of this, many of them – including those holding leading state positions – stop praying the namaz out of fear of losing their jobs."

Intrusive search, torture on return to Turkmenistan

In autumn 2019, officials detained an individual returning to Turkmenistan through Ashgabat Airport because a police officer claimed that the individual travelled to different countries for religious purposes, people close to the individual told Forum 18.

Without a search warrant, the officer demanded that the individual give him all electronic devices to be searched. When the individual refused, the police officer beat the individual on the head. After this, officers searched the individual's bags and flash drives. Police then released the individual, but maintained surveillance for several weeks.

In December 2018, security personnel at Ashgabat Airport detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours. She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2449)

Instead of human rights a roundtable

On 25 November 2019 a roundtable allegedly on freedom of conscience was held in the state-run Institute of State, Law and Democracy in Ashgabat, according to the Foreign Ministry website.

Attendees included Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyev, the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Gurbannazarova, and other officials from the Interior Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the Religious Affairs Department of the Cabinet of Ministers, and what were claimed to be "representatives of various confessions and religious organisations active in Turkmenistan".

Neither Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyev nor Human Rights Ombudsperson Gurbannazarova has answered Forum 18's questions about why Turkmenistan does not implement its binding international human rights law obligations on freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244), and instead punishes individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion and belief. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion and belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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