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## TURKMENISTAN: Five conscientious objectors jailed in two days

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

*Five conscientious objectors to compulsory military service who had already served sentences were jailed again in trials on 18 and 19 January. Courts gave all five two-year terms, four of them in strict-regime labour camp, bringing to six the number jailed so far in 2021. All had offered to perform an alternative civilian service, but Turkmenistan does not offer this. Nine of the 14 known jailed conscientious objectors – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are serving second sentences.*

In a series of trials on 18 and 19 January, courts have jailed five more conscientious objectors, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. As the five young men had previously served sentences for refusing compulsory service on grounds of conscience, four of the five were given two-year terms in strict regime labour camp. All had offered to perform an alternative civilian service, but Turkmenistan does not offer this. Turkmenistan has rejected repeated United Nations calls to introduce such a service.

Danev District Court in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region sentenced Azamatjan Narkulyev, Maksat Jumadurdiyev and Artur Yangibayev on 18 January. Danev District Court and Gurbansoltan eje District Court in the northern Dashoguz Region sentenced Veniamin Genjiyev and Ikhlosbek Rozmetov on 19 January. Three of these are aged 20, the other two are 23 (see below).

Danev District Court jailed four of the five conscientious objectors, a court official told Forum 18 on 26 January. All four have already lodged appeals. Forum 18 was unable to speak to the Judges as they were not in the building, the court official added (see below).

The latest sentences came one week after the 11 January jailing of another 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Artykmuradov. As he too had already served an earlier sentence on the same charges, a court elsewhere in Lebap Region similarly handed him a two-year strict regime sentence. He is about to be sent to the strict-regime labour camp in Seydi (see below).

These new sentences bring to six the number of conscientious objectors to military service known to have been convicted and jailed so far in 2021. This means 14 young conscientious objectors are known to be currently serving jail sentences (see full list below).

These new cases bring to 30 the number of known convictions and jailings of conscientious objectors since Turkmenistan resumed such jailings in January 2018 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2363](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363)). All of them are Jehovah's Witnesses.

An increasing number of conscientious objectors to military service are serving second sentences for the same "crime". Nine of the current 14 known conscientious objector prisoners – including all those sentenced in January - are serving second sentences (see below).

Six Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were freed from Seydi Labour Camp in 2020 after serving their sentences in full ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2628](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2628)).

The telephone of chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah at the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)) had been switched to a fax line on 26 January.

The telephones of Yusupgeldi Durdiyev, the Cabinet of Ministers official who chairs the government's Commission controlling religious communities; of the office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova; and of Yusupguly Eshshayev, the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 26 January (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors to military service and do not undertake any kind of activity supporting any country's military. But they are willing to undertake an alternative, totally civilian form of service, as is the right of all conscientious objectors to military service under international human rights law ([https://www.quno.org/sites/default/files/resources/QUNO%20Conscientious%20Objection%20-%20International%20Standards\\_Revised%202021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.quno.org/sites/default/files/resources/QUNO%20Conscientious%20Objection%20-%20International%20Standards_Revised%202021_FINAL.pdf)).

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls, for example by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, to introduce a genuine civilian alternative to compulsory military service, to stop prosecuting and punishing conscientious objectors, and to compensate those it has punished ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2476](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)).

The UN Human Rights Committee has published 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. In its most recent such Decision, published on 17 September 2019 (C/126/D/2302/2013), it ruled that the right to freedom of religion or belief of former conscientious objectors Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov, and Atamurad Suvhanov had been violated by their jailing (see below).

Asked why the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service in line with repeated United Nations (UN) recommendations, and why young men continue to be imprisoned, an official of the Foreign Ministry's International Organisations Department told Forum 18 in August 2020 that Turkmenistan "is dealing with these bodies, including the UN". He said he did not agree that Turkmenistan was failing to implement UN human rights recommendations (see below).

Another Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2018 and is awaiting a decision (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in May 2020 on behalf of 19 current or former jailed conscientious objectors ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2590](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2590)). The 19 men include some of those currently imprisoned in Seydi Labour Camp, plus others who have been released after serving earlier sentences.

Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief – all of them Muslims – are serving far longer jail terms (see below).

#### Four prosecutions in Danev District

On 30 December 2020, the Prosecutor's Office in Danev District of the eastern Lebap Region informed four previously convicted Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors that new cases had been opened against them ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)) under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

On 30 December 2020, Danev District Prosecutor's Office also seized the passports of each of the four.

The Military Conscription Office summoned Veniamin Muslimovich Genjiyev (born 12 May 2000) in March 2020, nine months after he completed his previous sentence. He submitted a written statement that he was not able to perform military service on grounds of conscience and offering to perform an alternative civilian service. In May 2020 the Military Conscription Office conducted a medical examination. It sent another summons on 12 October 2020 and Genjiyev again sent his written statement. Military Conscription Office staff visited his workplace the following month and then took him to the Regional Military Conscription Office for questioning over several hours. Again he was given a medical examination. Danev District Prosecutor's Office summoned Genjiyev on 25 December 2020 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)), where he again had to write an explanation for his refusal to perform military service.

Prison officials released Genjiyev on 25 June 2019 after he completed in full his one year jail term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2400](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400)).

The Military Conscription Office summoned Azamatjan Narkulyevich Narkulyev (born 9 November 2000) in May 2020 for a medical examination, four months after he completed his previous sentence. Military Conscription Office staff visited his workplace in November 2020 and then took him to the Regional Military Conscription Office for questioning over several hours. Again he was given a medical examination. Danev District Prosecutor's Office summoned him on 25 December 2020 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)), where he again had to write an explanation for his refusal to perform military service.

Prison officials released Narkulyev on 7 January 2020 after he completed in full his one year jail term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2443](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2443)).

The Military Conscription Office summoned Maksat Jumadurdiyevich Jumadurdiyev (born 15 May 2000) in March 2020. He submitted a written statement that he was not able to perform military service on grounds of conscience and offering to perform an alternative civilian service. In May 2020 the Military Conscription Office conducted a medical examination. He submitted another statement, but the head of the Office refused to accept it, sending him to the Regional Military Conscription Office. After questioning, it sent his case back to Danev District Military Conscription Office, with an instruction to forward his case to the Prosecutor's Office. On 15 December 2020, he passed a medical examination. Danev District Prosecutor's Office summoned him on 25 December 2020 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)), where he again had to write an explanation for his

refusal to perform military service.

Prison officials released Jumadurdiyev on 17 July 2019 after he completed in full his one year jail term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2400](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400)).

The Military Conscription Office summoned Artur Aydogdyevich Yangibayev (born 22 April 1997) in May 2020 for a medical examination, almost two years after he completed his previous sentence. He passed a medical examination on 15 December 2020. Danev District Prosecutor's Office summoned him on 25 December 2020 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)), where he was questioned and had to write an explanation for his refusal to perform military service.

In 2018, Yangibayev completed a sentence of two years' corrective labour ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2220](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220)), under which 20 percent of his salary was withheld to the state budget.

Four trials, convictions, jailings in Danev District

The Prosecutor's Office presented all four cases to Danev District Court in January 2021. All four were tried under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

At the end of hearings on 18 January, Judge Shohrat Veljikov sentenced Azamatjan Narkulyev and Artur Yangibayev to the maximum term of two years, Narkulyev in a strict regime labour camp and Yangibayev in an ordinary regime labour camp, an official of Danev District Court told Forum 18 on 26 January. The same day, Judge Bahargul Kadyrova handed Maksat Jumadurdiyev a two-year strict regime labour camp term.

At the end of a hearing on 19 January, Judge Veljikov sentenced Veniamin Genjiyev to the same maximum term of two years in a strict regime labour camp, the court official added. Forum 18 was unable to speak to the Judges as they were not in the building, according to the official.

The official said all four have lodged appeals against their convictions, which would be handed on to Lebap Regional Court after 28 January.

Officials have already told Yangibayev he will be transferred to the ordinary-regime labour camp LB-E/12 at Seydi, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The other three do not know whether they will be sent to the strict-regime labour camp LB-E/11 at Seydi or to the strict-regime camp MR-E/16 in Bayramali in Mary Region.

Fifth new trial, conviction, jailing

Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov (born 26 November 1997), who is from Gurbansoltan eje District of the northern Dashoguz Region, received phone calls both in November 2019 and September 2020 from the Military Conscription Office requesting that he come to the office to pick up a military card, but he decided not to go, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Although Rozmetov had never received any previous summons, on 7 October 2020 officials handed his younger sibling a notification letter indicating that Rozmetov had repeatedly failed to appear at the Military Conscription Office since July 2019. The letter stated that his case would be sent to the Prosecutor's Office if he refused to come.

Within days, Rozmetov received a summons and a request to undergo a medical examination. He then mailed his written statement to the Military Conscription Office refusing military service. During the next few weeks, the Military Conscription Office summoned him several times, but he refused to go.

On 11 November 2020, Rozmetov received an official response from the district Military Conscription Office stating that he had been found fit and was obliged to perform military service. He again received a summons and he again mailed his written statement.

On 24 November 2020, military officers forcefully took Rozmetov from his workplace to the Military Conscription Office. The next day he underwent a full medical examination and was requested to again write an explanatory note of his refusal to perform military service, after which he was released.

A Prosecutor interrogated Rozmetov on 9 December 2020. On 31 December, officials informed him that they had opened a case against him under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The case was handed to Gurbansoltan eje District Court in January 2021.

At his trial on 19 January, Judge Merdan Tachmamedov convicted Rozmetov and sentenced him to two years' imprisonment in a strict-regime labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Prison officials released Rozmetov on 11 July 2019 after he completed in full his one year jail term

([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2495](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2495)).

Rozmetov's original trial in July 2018 was held not in a court building but in the conference hall of Gurbansoltan eje District Military Conscription Office in Dashoguz Region. The court verdict said that the trial was open, but gave no reason for the decision to hold the trial in the Conscription Office ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2402](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2402)). It is unknown if the trial was meant to send a signal to local young men of what happens to those who refuse compulsory military service. The Regional Court rejected his first appeal the same month.

2021's first two-year strict-regime jail term

Ruslan Khadynyaz oglu Artykmuradov (born 24 May 2000), who lives in the eastern Lebap Region, was sentenced to two years' strict regime labour camp on 11 January, four weeks after his 15 December 2020 arrest.

Judge Chemen Berdyeva of Sayat District Court found him guilty under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2630](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2630)). This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

Judge Berdyeva handed down the harsher sentence as this is the second time the court has sentenced Artykmuradov to a jail term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience.

On 14 January an official of Sayat District Prosecutor's Office refused to explain to Forum 18 why Artykmuradov was being punished for the second time, simply for offering to do an alternative civilian service rather than military service. The official also refused to identify the prosecutor in the case and put the phone down.

Artykmuradov chose not to appeal against his latest conviction and it has now entered legal force.

Artykmuradov had filed a written statement on 14 December 2020 with Sayat District Military Conscription Office refusing compulsory military service ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2628](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2628)).

After holding Artykmuradov since 18 December 2020 at the pre-trial detention prison LB-E/9 in Turkmenabat, the prison authorities are preparing to transfer him to a strict-regime labour camp. The most likely labour camp is at Seydi in Lebap Region, where the strict regime camp LB-E/11 is next to the ordinary regime labour camp LB-E/12 where eight other conscientious objectors jailed between 2019 and 2020 are held (see below).

A prisoner died of coronavirus on 14 August 2020 in strict-regime labour camp LB-E/11, Turkmen.news noted on 24 August 2020. Government officials claim that the country has no coronavirus infections.

Prison authorities could send Artykmuradov to serve his sentence in the strict-regime labour camp MR-E/16 at Bayramali in Mary Region. Camp officials are known for high levels of corruption. After prison visits from relatives were banned in March 2020 because of coronavirus, prison guards began offering prisoners to buy food from them to make up for food parcels earlier brought by prisoners' relatives, Turkmen.news noted on 19 November 2020.

After Artykmuradov refused military service on grounds of conscience after his first call-up in 2018, Prosecutors in Lebap Region brought a case against the then 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1.

On 13 August 2018, Sayat District Court found Artykmuradov guilty and jailed him for one year in an ordinary regime labour camp ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2405](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2405)). Artykmuradov had not been under arrest in the run-up to the trial. He was arrested in the court room after the verdict was handed down.

Lebap Regional Court rejected Artykmuradov's appeal on 11 September 2018. He served his sentence in the labour camp at Seydi, where conscientious objectors mostly serve their sentences. He was freed on 12 August 2019 at the end of his term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2504](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2504)).

Second convictions increasing

A growing number of conscientious objectors are being convicted twice on the same charges when they continue to refuse renewed call-up to compulsory military service after completing their first sentences.

Nine of the current conscientious objector prisoners (all of them Jehovah's Witnesses) have been convicted twice of the same "crime" since Turkmenistan restarted jailings of conscientious objectors in January 2018 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2363](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363)).

In January 2018, Koneurgench City Court jailed Kerven Kakabayev (born 9 September 1996) for one year

([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2363](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363)). He is from Koneurgench in the northern Dashoguz Region, and was called up in 2017. This was a year after a December 2014 criminal conviction for conscientious objection expired in December 2016. That earlier conviction did not lead to a labour camp sentence ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2196](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196)).

In February 2020, Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov (born 19 August 1998), a Jehovah's Witness from the northern Dashoguz Region's ethnic Uzbek minority, was convicted for a second time for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. He was given a two-year jail term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2547](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2547)). In February 2017 he had been convicted under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 for refusing military service. The sentence allowed him to live at home under restrictions, but during the two years the state took 20 per cent of his wages ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2318](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318)).

Matyakubov's older brother Dovran was convicted and imprisoned twice for his conscientious objection to military service, in December 2010 and again in December 2012. Dovran Matyakubov was released from his second sentence under amnesty in October 2014. ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2009](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2009))

In August 2020, Niyazov District Court in Dashoguz Region jailed two brothers – 26-year-old Sanjarbek Saburov and 21-year-old Eldor Saburov – for two years each for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. On 1 September 2020, Dashoguz Regional Court rejected the Saburov brothers' appeals ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2600](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2600)).

Sanjarbek Saburov refused military service during the spring 2016 call-up. On 17 July 2016 he was placed in preventive detention while awaiting trial. On 9 August 2016, a Judge handed him a two-year suspended sentence. He was released in the courtroom after more than three weeks' detention ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2220](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220)).

In 2017, Eldor Saburov similarly refused to undertake military service on grounds of conscience. On 19 December 2017, Niyazov District Court sentenced him to two years' corrective labour, with 20 per cent of his wages taken by the State ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2363](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363)).

#### No alternative to compulsory military service

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)). Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defence as a "sacred duty" of everyone and states that military service is compulsory for men.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience generally face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2 punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime "by means of inflicting injury to oneself, or by simulation of illness, by means of forgery of documents, or other fraudulent ways". Punishment is a jail term of one to four years. The first known use of Article 219, Part 2 to punish a conscientious objector was the case of Azat Ashirov, while Serdar Dovletov's case was the second (see below).

From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)), rather than imprisonment. However, jailings resumed in January 2018.

Courts jailed 12 conscientious objectors in 2018, two of them for two years and 10 for one year. ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2443](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2443)) Courts jailed 7 conscientious objectors in 2019, one of them for four years, one for three years, one for two years and four for one year ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2522](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2522)). Courts jailed 5 conscientious objectors in 2020, four of them for two years and one for one year.

#### Calls for alternative civilian service ignored

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service. The most recent call came in the latest United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee Decision, published in September 2019.

The Human Rights Committee has issued 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. In its most recent such Decision, published on 17 September 2019 (CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013 (<https://undocs.org/CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013>)), it ruled that the right to freedom of religion or belief of former conscientious objectors Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov, and Atamurad Suvhanov had been violated by their jailing.

Nazarov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1733](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1733)) and Sharipov were jailed in 2012 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1802](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1802)), and Suvhanov (for the second time) in 2013 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1817](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1817)). The men had lodged their Human Rights Committee appeals in August 2013.

All three men also complained of "inhuman and degrading treatment" after their arrests. The Human Rights Committee stressed that Turkmenistan is under an obligation to make reparation to Nazarov, Sharipov and Suvhanov for the violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including to "expunge their criminal records and to provide them with adequate compensation. The State party is also under an obligation to avoid similar violations of the Covenant in the future".

The Committee therefore urged Turkmenistan to meet its obligations to avoid similar violations such as by changing the law, "for instance, by providing the possibility of exemption from service or alternative service of a civilian nature".

Another conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee on 20 June 2018 and is awaiting a decision, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. When sentenced in Charjew to one year's imprisonment in January 2018, Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2363](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363)).

#### Jehovah's Witnesses push for alternative civilian service

Jehovah's Witnesses have urged Turkmenistan's government to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. In March 2020, local Jehovah's Witnesses visited the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)) in the capital Ashgabat.

At the Commission, the Jehovah's Witnesses raised the issue of an alternative civilian service, as well as pushing for the government to allow their communities to gain official registration (officials have always rejected such applications) ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)), to end harassment of young Jehovah's Witnesses and to allow a visit by foreign Jehovah's Witnesses.

"The meeting was cordial," Jehovah's Witnesses noted, "but the official recommended contacting the appropriate Ministries and commented specifically that he was unable personally to resolve the matter of registration."

The telephone of the Commission's chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah had been switched to a fax machine when Forum 18 called on 26 January. The telephone of Yusupgeldi Durdiyev, the Cabinet of Ministers official who chairs the Commission, went unanswered the same day. (Both Durdiyev and Nasrullah are former imams.)

#### Why no alternative civilian service?

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not introduce an alternative civilian service and why conscientious objectors who are willing to perform such an alternative service, like the 14 Jehovah's Witness young men, continue to be jailed.

On 26 January, the telephone at the office of the government-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered. The telephone of Yusupguly Eshshayev, the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, similarly went unanswered each time Forum 18 called the same day.

Asked why the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service in line with repeated United Nations (UN) recommendations, and why young men continue to be imprisoned, Ata (last name unknown) of the Foreign Ministry's International Organisations Department told Forum 18 in August 2020 that Turkmenistan "is dealing with these bodies, including the UN".

Ata said he did not agree that Turkmenistan is failing to implement UN human rights recommendations. "Our Department is dealing with difficult issues, including with the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation, and the OSCE," he claimed. "We are trying to do our best."

#### Many prisoners of conscience

The 14 jailed conscientious objectors are among the many people Turkmenistan has jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief. ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244))

Five Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court in July 2018. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2399](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399)), where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

More than 60 Muslims from in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabat were imprisoned in 2013 and after to punish them for their involvement in a Muslim study group. Most or all the prisoners are believed to be held at Ovadan-Depe. Relatives often have no information as to whether they are still alive. Three of the group are known to have died in prison. ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2318](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318))

## Eight conscientious objectors currently in Seydi Labour Camp

Fourteen Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are known - as of 26 January - to be serving jail terms. Eight of them are currently imprisoned at the harsh ordinary-regime Seydi Labour Camp ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)) in the desert in Lebap Region.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat

Seydi

uchr. LB-E/12

Turkmenistan

In his complaint to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, former Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Aibek Salayev stated that conditions in Seydi Labour Camp LB-E/12, where he was held, were "inhuman" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2476](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)).

Salayev noted that the Camp was "known for its overcrowdedness, harsh climatic conditions, scarce supplies of food, medication and personal hygiene products, and for tuberculosis, skin diseases, its very high mortality rate, and physical abuse" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2476](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)). Officials also threatened him with rape in the Camp.

The UN Human Rights Committee found that Turkmenistan had violated the rights of Salayev and another Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev. ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2476](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)) The Views of the Committee on the case (CCPR/C/125/D/2448/2014 (<https://www.undocs.org/CCPR/C/125/D/2448/2014>)) were adopted on 18 April 2019. It stated that Turkmenistan "is also under an obligation to take all steps necessary to prevent similar violations from occurring in the future".

Relatives who want to send food or other parcels to prisoners at either of the Seydi Labour Camps must bring the parcel to the marble arch in the remote village of Uchajy in neighbouring Mary Region, 150 kms (95 miles) away. Three times a month, prison guards collect the parcels to take them to the Labour Camps, Turkmen.news noted. Prisoners complain that parcels often are not handed over, or if they are fresh food has gone off, the news service added. Money can now be sent in parcels, but often is missing when a parcel is handed over.

## List of known jailed conscientious objectors

Fourteen conscientious objectors to compulsory military service (listed below in chronological order of sentence) – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are known to be jailed. Eleven are serving prison sentences under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"), Ashirov and Dovletov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2, and Atahanov under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2. Nine are serving second sentences.

1) Bahtiyar Amirjanovich Atahanov; born 17 June 2000; sentenced 15 July 2019 Tejen City Court under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2; appeal rejected 20 August 2019 Ahal Regional Court; four years' ordinary regime labour camp.

2) Azat Gurbanmammedovich Ashirov, born 7 January 1999; sentenced 31 July 2019 Abadan District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appeal rejected 3 September 2019 Ashgabat City Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

3) Serdar Nurmammedovich Dovletov, born 2 December 1993; sentenced 12 November 2019 Bayramali City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appealed rejected 3 December 2019 Mary Regional Court; three years' ordinary regime labour camp.

4) Kamiljan Ergashovich Ergashov, born 27 June 2001; sentenced 13 January 2020 Niyazov District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 4 February 2020 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

5) Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov, born 19 August 1998; sentenced 17 February 2020 Boldumsaz District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 17 March 2020 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp (second sentence).

6) Sanjarbek Davranbekovich Saburov, born 12 August 1994; sentenced 6 August 2020 Niyazov District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 1 September 2020 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp

(second sentence).

7) Eldor Davranbekovich Saburov, born 9 April 1999; sentenced 6 August 2020 Niyazov District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 1 September 2020 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp (second sentence).

8) Myrat Baymukhammedovich Orazgeldiyev, born 6 May 2002; sentenced 3 September 2020 Vekilbazar District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 September 2020 Mary Regional Court; one year's ordinary regime labour camp.

9) Ruslan Khadynyaz oglu Artykmuradov; born 24 May 2000; sentenced 11 January 2021 Sayat District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; chose not to appeal; two years' strict regime labour camp (second sentence).

10) Azamatjan Narkulyevich Narkulyev, born 9 November 2000; sentenced 18 January 2021 Danev District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Lebap Regional Court; two years' strict regime labour camp (second sentence).

11) Maksat Jumadurdyevich Jumadurdyev, born 15 May 2000; sentenced 18 January 2021 Danev District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Lebap Regional Court; two years' strict regime labour camp (second sentence).

12) Artur Aydogdyevich Yangibayev, born 22 April 1997; sentenced 18 January 2021 Danev District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Lebap Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp (second sentence).

13) Veniamin Muslimovich Genjiyev, born 12 May 2000; sentenced 19 January 2021 Danev District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Lebap Regional Court; two years' strict regime labour camp (second sentence).

14) Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov, born 26 November 1997; sentenced 19 January 2021 Gurbansoltan eje District Court, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; two years' strict regime labour camp (second sentence).

(END)

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

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey  
([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://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 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1351](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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