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TURKMENISTAN: Carpet seized to pay illegal Baptist fine

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has learnt that officials have seized property from Baptists, in order to pay a fine imposed last year for unregistered worship in a private flat. The prosecution is illegal under international law and breaks the human rights agreements Turkmenistan has signed. The Baptists, Yelena and Vladimir Lemeshko, believe they are innocent of any offence. The local court has refused to give them a copy of the order confiscating their property and officials have refused to talk to Forum 18.

Forum 18 News Service has learnt that officials in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (Türkmenbashi) (formerly Krasnovodsk) have seized property from members of a local Baptist church, to pay a fine imposed last year for unregistered worship in a private flat. One Baptist family's property has already been seized, and officials have threatened to seize property from others who were fined for participating in the service.

Yelena Lemeshko, who is currently on enforced leave from her work and has four young children, received a court summons on 22 January for non-payment of her fine for attending the service. She refused to come to court, because she believes she is innocent of any offence, the local Baptists told Forum 18. In international law, the fine for unregistered worship is illegal. Also fined was her husband, Vladimir Lemeshko. He had a job at a local factory, and his fine was deducted from his wages, as happened to other Baptists.

On 26 January, the court executor M. Ilbaev, along with his colleague Mamedov and two neighbours who were acting as witnesses, came to the Lemeshko family apartment. Ilbaev warned Yelena Lemeshko that her belongings would be confiscated in lieu of the unpaid fine if she did not pay up by 31 January. On the spot, without waiting for 31 January, they took down a carpet (measuring 2 by 3 metres) hanging on the wall and a wall clock, filled out a form stating that belongings had been confiscated, and took them away with them. When Yelena Lemeshko's husband Vladimir complained that the confiscated items were worth more than the sum of the fine, Ilbaev replied: "Never mind, we'll value them at the amount we need." As he left, he added: "This is how it will be with everyone that doesn't pay their fines."

On 27 January, Vladimir Lemeshko appealed to the court to give him a copy of its decision on the confiscation of belongings, but was refused outright.

Forum 18 News Service tried to reach the Lemeshko flat in Turkmenbashi, as well as the number for Maria Sheldkret, who owned the apartment where the raided service took place. However, no-one answered the telephone in either home. It is possible that the authorities have cut off the telephone lines to both homes.

The fines were imposed after officials on 11 May 2003 raided and broke up the Turkmenbashi Baptist church's service in the home of church member Maria Sheldkret (see F18News 15 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=55). Those attending the service were subsequently summoned to a hearing of the administrative commission where they were each fined 250,000 manats (12 US dollars at the street exchange rate, equivalent to 85 Norwegian Kroner or 10 Euros). [The average salary is estimated to be no more than US\$30 a month.] The Baptists refused to admit any guilt, and stated in writing that the accusation that they had met unlawfully was false.

These Baptists belong to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists), who split from the All-Union Council of Baptists in 1961, when state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then leadership. It has refused state registration ever since.

Forum 18's attempts to talk to officials also failed. On 20 February, Forum 18 reached the receptionist for the Turkmenbashi procuracy, Khimry Ovlyagulyamova, by telephone. The procuracy's aide told Forum 18 that the public prosecutor would be there in one hour's time. However, when Forum 18 telephoned an hour later, the man who picked up the receiver asked who was asking for the public prosecutor. When Forum 18 identified itself, the man declared "You've come through to the wrong number," and hung up. Each time subsequently the receiver at the procuracy was put down straight away.

Turkmenistan has one of the harshest systems of state control over religious life of any of the former Soviet republics, and almost no pretence of its rejection of religious freedom. The latest religion law, which came into force at the time of its publication in the

official press on 10 November 2003, criminalises unregistered religious ctivity. This is illegal under international law and defies human rights agreements signed by Turkmenistan.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>

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