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TURKMENISTAN: Religious communities theoretically permitted, but attacked in practice?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Despite Turkmenistan now theoretically allowing minority religious communities to get state registration, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that in practice attacks have been renewed against the Jehovah's Witness and Baha'i minority communities. President Saparmurat Niyazov announced the changes on 11 March, the same day that a Jehovah's Witness was arrested and pressured by officials, including a Mullah, to renounce his faith and then fired from his job. There have also been at least three raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in the capital Ashgabat and reported raids in other towns. Also, a Baha'i has had his home raided and been pressured to renounce his faith. Believers from the country's banned minority faiths – including Catholics, a variety of Protestant groups, Shia Muslims, Jews, Adventists, Pentecostal and Armenian Apostolic Christians, Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'i – are unsure whether it is apply for state registration. Although some Protestants are optimistic about the situation improving, the NSM secret police told an arrested Baha'i that the new law "applies only to Sunni Islam and the Orthodox Church, while such dubious groups as yours will be thoroughly checked out with the aim of preventing any possible conflicts." And on 29 March President Niyazov banned Muslims from registering new mosques.

Despite the new religion law allowing minority religious communities to register – at least in theory – for the first time since 1997, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that pressure has been renewed on some minority communities. Since President Saparmurat Niyazov heralded the legal changes in an 11 March decree, the home of a Baha'i in the town of Balkanabad (formerly Nebit-dag [Nebitdag]) was raided and he was pressured to renounce his faith, while there have been at least three raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] and reported raids in other towns. "Officials are quite nervous at the moment," believers in Ashgabat told Forum 18, "as they react to international pressure." However, the latest raids indicate that even senior officials are continuing to pressure members of some communities, with the Baha'i and one of the Jehovah's Witnesses even pressured to renounce their faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses complain of a "new wave" of persecution against them. "The attitude to our work has not changed," one told Forum 18.

Believers from the country's banned minority faiths – including Catholic, Protestant (including Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist and New Apostolic), Shia Muslim, Jewish, Armenian Apostolic, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness and Baha'i communities – are divided as to whether it is safe to apply for registration with the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry. Some have sought information about how to apply and are preparing to lodge applications, while others remain suspicious that putting signatures to applications will only open up the signatories to persecution. On 29 March President Niyazov appeared to rule out Muslims from registering any new mosques under the new religion law (see F18News 30 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=291).

Despite the raids on the Baha'i and the Jehovah's Witnesses, an Ashgabat Protestant Radik Zakirov told Forum 18 on 1 April that he is not aware of any Protestant Christian churches that have suffered raids or fines since members of an unregistered Baptist congregation in Balkanabad were fined in January in the wake of a raid last November (see F18News 9 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=225). Unregistered Baptists in Moscow, who retain close links with their communities in Turkmenistan, told Forum 18 on 1 April that these fines and the confiscation of property in lieu of a fine from a Baptist family in Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashy] in January (see F18News 26 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=264) are the most recent incidents. "We have not learned of any problems since then."

Jehovah's Witness representatives in Russia, who maintain close contacts with their communities in Turkmenistan, have told Forum 18 that "there is no realistic chance" of getting registration. "There has been no real change," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 1 April. "Until our prisoners are freed and until we can meet undisturbed there won't be any serious attempt to change."

On 11 March – the same day the president issued his decree – a Jehovah's Witness in Ashgabat was taken to the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, where seven officials – including a mullah – pressured him to renounce his faith. It remains unclear if the mullah was either the Gengeshi's chairman, Yagshymyrat Atamyradov, or the deputy chairman, Kakageldy Vepaev (who is also the government-appointed chief mufti of Turkmenistan). That same day, after refusing to renounce his faith, the

man was fired from his job, leaving his family with no breadwinner.

Reached at the Gengeshi on 1 April, Muhamed Resulov – who gave his position as assistant to the deputy chairman Andrei Sapunov, who is a Russian Orthodox priest – declined to discuss this case – or indeed anything else – with Forum 18.

On 13 March, more than twenty Jehovah's Witnesses, including women and children, were interrogated by National Security Ministry officers after being detained for meeting in a private flat in Ashgabad (see F18News 23 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=285).

On 18 March, Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18, police visited the home of another Jehovah's Witness in Ashgabad, claiming that he had not paid his most recent fine imposed for conducting unregistered religious activity. "This is not true – he had paid," sources told Forum 18, "but without any court hearing they insisted he pay 250,000 manats [350 Norwegian Kroner, 41 Euros, or 51 US dollars]. He had to pay again." The man is believed to have been fined up to ten times in the past few years for his religious activity. The average monthly salary is estimated to be less than 30 US dollars a month.

The Jehovah's Witness sources declined to name their members targeted in the three Ashgabad raids for fear of making their situation worse. The raids came in the wake of a 9 March incident in Ashgabad when a female Jehovah's Witness was taken to the police station, had her Bible and other literature confiscated and she was threatened with rape. The Jehovah's Witnesses said there had been raids in other towns since the 11 March decree. "No-one mentioned to our people the new law during the raids, or the possibility to register," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "We expected that they would have mentioned this."

On 24 March, local officers of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police raided the home of a Baha'i, Rahman S. (full name unknown), in the town of Balkanabad. The exiled human rights group the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported that the officers confiscated religious literature and other materials belonging to the local Baha'i community. The officers demanded that Rahman renounce his faith which, they complained, "provokes schism in our democratic society" and threatened to have his home confiscated from him.

"I thought that with the signing of the new decree on religious freedoms, our situation would improve," Rahman was quoted as stating, "but nothing has changed." He complained that Balkanabad's Baha'i community has not been able to function legally since 1997 as it had not been able to gather the signatures of 500 adult citizen members required until the change in the law in March of this year. Rahman tried to tell the NSM officers of the new law, but they reportedly responded: "This applies only to Sunni Islam and the Orthodox Church, while such dubious groups as yours will be thoroughly checked out with the aim of preventing any possible conflicts."

The Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative reported that the Balkanabad Baha'is have in recent years suffered numerous police raids on meetings in private homes, while members have been detained, sacked from their jobs and fined.

However, Zakirov, a member of a non-denominational Protestant church in Ashgabad, said he was "very optimistic" that the situation for believers would change for the better. "The government has responded quickly to international pressure," he told Forum 18. "This shows they have learnt." He said his church is not intending to register under the new law. "We do not consider it necessary." After explaining to officials that they are merely a "circle of friends" and not an organisation with a hierarchy, he said they understand. "They know our community inside out anyway, they know who all our members are," Zakirov declared. "They know we're not dangerous."

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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