

19 May 2004

TURKMENISTAN: Jehovah's Witness prisoners threatened with death

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two of the five Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in labour camp in the town of Seydi have been threatened with death, reportedly in the second half of April, with the full knowledge of the camp administration, Jehovah's Witnesses report. "We take these threats seriously," one told Forum 18 News Service. They plead for international attention, fearing for the safety of the five - Aleksandr Matveyev, Rinat Babadjanov, Shohrat Mitogorov, Ruslan Nasyrov and Rozymamed Satlykov. Jehovah's Witnesses say the five are regularly beaten, pressured to renounce their faith and adopt Islam, take the oath of allegiance to the president and to agree to do compulsory military service. Family and friends have been unable to visit their prisoners since early April.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan have expressed fears for the safety of their five conscientious objectors in labour camp in the eastern town of Seydi after two of them were threatened with death, apparently in the second half of April. "They were threatened with physical elimination," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 News Service. "We take these threats seriously." Although the Jehovah's Witnesses have been unable to discover if the threats were directly from the prison administration or individual guards, they believe these threats came with the full knowledge of the prison administration. Forum 18 has been unable to reach the labour camp administration to find out why the threats have been issued and why the five prisoners are routinely maltreated.

Fears have increased as, since early April, the prisoners - Aleksandr Matveyev, Rinat Babadjanov, Shohrat Mitogorov, Ruslan Nasyrov and Rozymamed Satlykov - have been isolated from their families and friends. "There has been no possibility to visit them since then," a Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not know which two prisoners have been singled out for death threats.

Local Jehovah's Witnesses close to the prisoners say that only international attention can protect the five. "In the past it has helped when the names of the prisoners became known around the world."

They say the five have been regularly beaten in the labour camp (see F18News 10 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=315). "Sometimes the beatings are daily, other times it eases off," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "The guards conduct the beatings or use other prisoners to do it for them." The source said pressure is relentless on the prisoners to say the compulsory oath of allegiance to the president, to abandon their faith and convert to Islam and to agree to conduct military service.

The Seydi camp was reportedly built for 400 to 500 prisoners, but often holds several thousand at a time. Sometimes up to 20 prisoners have to share a cell designed for ten. Prisoners are often sent to the punishment isolation cell for periods of five to fifteen days.

In addition to the five imprisoned conscientious objectors, a sixth Jehovah's Witness – Kurban Zakirov - is serving an eight-year sentence on what his community insists are trumped-up charges. Forum 18 notes that, together with former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment at a closed trial in the capital Ashgabad on 2 March, these are Turkmenistan's known religious prisoners. It is believed several muftis have been sent into internal exile without trial.

The address of the Seydi camp is:

746222 Turkmenistan,

Lebap velayat

Seydi

Uchr. LB-K/12

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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