

3 June 2004

## TURKMENISTAN: Adventists get state registration, Baha'is may be next

By John Kinahan, Forum 18

*Seventh Day Adventists have confirmed that, on Monday 1 June, they were given state registration, the first religious group to be registered under the new state registration rules, and Baha'is are likely to be confirmed later today (3 June) as the next group to be registered. Other religious groups have expressed cautious optimism that they too may be registered, however, the state registration changes do not affect groups which refuse registration on principle, such as the "initsiativniki" Baptists. Unregistered religious activity remains, against international law, a de facto criminal offence, and it remains unclear how far newly-registered religious groups will be permitted to operate without being persecuted, or without the imposition of the heavy state control imposed on Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church, the only groups to be state registered before 1 June.*

Reliable sources have confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that the Seventh Day Adventists were given state registration on Monday 1 June, the first religious group to gain registration under the new registration rules, which were relaxed under intense international pressure (see F18News 13 May 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=320](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=320)). The Baha'is are likely to be confirmed later today (3 June) as the next group to be registered, and other religious groups have expressed cautious optimism that they too may be registered. Before 1 June, only Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church had gained state registration.

The relaxation of state registration rules does not affect groups like the so-called "initsiativniki" Baptists, who have refused since 1961 to apply for state registration in any country formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Officials insist – against international law - that unregistered religious activity remains a de facto criminal offence, despite a presidential decree formally revoking this criminalisation, (see F18News 24 May 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=326](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=326)). In the light of this contradiction and state religious persecution continuing while relaxations were announced (see F18News 1 April 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=293](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=293)), attention is focused on what the reality of religious life for state registered religious groups will be like, and whether harsh restrictions announced for state-registered groups, including a requirement that any worship service or other event needs prior state permission, will be enforced (see F18News 10 May 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=317](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=317)).

Both the previously registered religious groups, the Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church, remain heavily controlled by the state. For example, imams and priests are forced in sermons to quote approvingly from the Ruhnama ("Book of the Soul"), President Niyazov's book of "spiritual writings".

It also remains unclear whether, despite the easing of registration restrictions, Muslims will be permitted to build new mosques in the light of President Niyazov's recent ban on this (see F18News 30 March 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=291](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=291)), and whether Adventists will be permitted to rebuild their church in the capital Ashgabad, which the authorities demolished in 1999 at one week's notice, for a "road-widening" scheme which never took place. (See Forum 18's full 2001 report <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/relfreerep/forum18.pdf> for extensive documentation of the demolition.) Several Hare Krishna temples were also demolished in 1999.

Closely questioned by Forum 18 on 24 May about whether places of worship can be rebuilt or will be demolished, Murat Muradov, an official of the Adalat ("Fairness") Ministry stated that "something like that might have happened in 1999, but not now." However, Muradov also in that conversation dismissed reports of persecution with laughter, describing persecuted believers Forum 18 has spoken to as "sick" (see F18News 24 May 2004 [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=326](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=326)). Adventist Pastor Pavel Fedotov, speaking to Adventist News Network, says that the legally registered address of his church is his home, but the church has permission to hold meetings in other places.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=296](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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