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TURKMENISTAN: When will Adventist worship be permitted?

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

Even though the Seventh Day Adventist Church has gained state registration, Adventists in the capital Ashgabad still cannot meet together for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, and a ceremonial meeting to celebrate the relaunch of the church with legal status was cancelled as officials refused to give permission for the event. The Baptist Church, has still not completed the registration process and has not yet been given an official seal needed to issue legal documents. The only other religious communities to receive registration before the process stopped were the Baha'i and Hare Krishna communities, but other religious communities have got nowhere with their applications. Turkmen officials continue to claim a "liberalisation" of religion policy, but they do not explain continuing police raids and threats, why many religious minority communities who have applied for registration cannot get it, or why some of those with registration cannot meet for worship.

Four months after receiving official registration as a religious community (see F18News 3 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=333), Adventists in the capital Ashgabad still cannot meet together for worship, sources have told Forum 18 News Service. A ceremonial meeting to celebrate the relaunch of the church with legal status and to thank officials for helping in the process - due to have taken place in an Ashgabad hotel on 11 July - had to be abruptly cancelled because officials refused to give permission. The meeting still has not taken place. Meanwhile the Baptist Church, despite being handed its registration certificate on 25 June, still has not completed the registration process and has not yet been given its official seal needed to issue any legal documents.

Turkmen officials have repeatedly trumpeted what they regard as their country's "liberalisation" in the area of religious practice. On 27 September, foreign minister Rashid Meredov told the United Nations General Assembly in New York of what he claimed were "real guarantees of enjoyment of personal, political, economic, social and other rights of citizens".

He claimed that in today's Turkmenistan "there is guaranteed freedom of registration and activity of religious organisations and groups in accordance with universally recognised norms irrespective of the number of adherents or faith". And he added: "A number of important legislative acts on these issues were adopted and in accordance with them at present several confessions are registered and functioning in Turkmenistan." He did not explain the continuing police raids and threats, the ongoing de facto criminalisation of religious activity, why many religious minority communities who have applied for registration cannot get it, or why even some of those with registration cannot meet for worship (See F18News 11 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=392).

At the same time, Turkmenistan's ambassador to the United States, Meret Orazov, has been defending his government's restriction of the rights of religious believers. "Human rights organisations want us to immediately apply the same kind of religious freedom which you have here. We're trying to explain to these people that we support human rights, but that we need a little time," he declared in an interview in the September issue of the Washington Diplomat magazine.

"We grew out of communism, and the country had no experience in how to handle all these new religions," Orazov added. "Traditionally, we had two big religions, Islam and Orthodoxy. Suddenly, communism was destroyed, a lot of people started to express different faiths, and we weren't ready for all these new religions."

To celebrate the regaining of registration on 1 June after a seven and a half year break (during which their church in Ashgabad was bulldozed), the Adventists wished to hold a festive meeting. They made an agreement with the Nissa Hotel in central Ashgabad to rent a large room for the meeting in the hotel at 6pm on 11 July. After notifying the Adalat (Justice) Ministry, the city khyakimlik (administration) and the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs, they printed 150 tickets for the 150-seat venue and distributed them to officials, church members and friends.

"We organised a nice programme of music and celebrations to thank the authorities for granting us registration," one Adventist told Forum 18. "We notified all the authorities, trying to do everything in accordance with the law."

However, on the morning of 9 July, without prior warning, the hotel administration contacted the Adventists to tell them to bring written permission for the meeting from the Gengeshi. "They said no written permission, no meeting."

That same morning the Adventists wrote to the Gengeshi requesting such written permission. However, Murad Karriyev, one of the Gengeshi's deputy chairmen, told the Adventists he would not give permission in writing because the country's religion law does not require such permission for registered religious organisations to hold such meetings. "He was right, and in our statute which has been officially registered, it also says we can organise such meetings," Adventists told Forum 18. "But of course if he had wanted to help he could have written to give his permission. This was done to ban the meeting without showing who was to blame."

The hotel administration reportedly told the Adventists that one of the hotel's bosses had telephoned to insist that they bring written permission.

The Adventists then turned to another hotel in the city, the Akaltin Plaza, soon reaching agreement with the administration over hosting the event. However, ten minutes later the administration phoned the event organisers to say that the hotel had just had a telephone call instructing them that the event could go ahead only with the written permission of the Gengeshi. The hotel told the Adventists that it did not have the right to tell them who had telephoned to issue the instruction.

The Adventists wrote to the Adalat Ministry to ask how the church should go about renting venues for their inaugural meeting and for services, but had no reply. They also wrote to the city administration, which failed to answer the question about how the church should go about renting facilities but told church members not to write again.

On 12 July the Adventists wrote to Karriyev at the Gengeshi asking him to explain the system for getting permission for meetings and services. Karriyev failed to respond in writing and, when asked, reportedly told the Adventists that he will never respond to letters. "So we never held our inaugural meeting and we still cannot meet openly for worship," one Adventist told Forum 18 sadly. "When it comes to services, the situation has not changed over the past five years."

When Forum 18 called Karriyev's number at the Gengeshi on 4 October to find out why the Adventist inaugural meeting and regular services are being obstructed, a man sounding like Karriyev declared that he was away on a work trip. Another official who answered the Gengeshi's main number declined to answer any of Forum 18's questions but insisted Karriyev was in his office.

It remains unclear why the Baptists' registration has not yet been completed, especially as the Adalat Ministry seemed very keen to give the church its registration certificate before the church had even lodged its completed application. Although Baptist congregations can now meet for worship in two of Turkmenistan's cities, where they have regained prayer houses earlier sealed by the authorities to prevent worship, the congregation in Ashgabad suffers the same restriction as the Adventists: until its church – confiscated by the authorities in 2001 – is handed back there is nowhere legal it can meet (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390).

Two other religious minorities – the Baha'i and Hare Krishna communities – also received registration this summer before the registration process came to a stop. The Baha'i community has been able to reopen its meeting place in Ashgabad and resume meetings (see F18News 3 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=333).

Other religious communities that lodged registration applications with the Adalat Ministry – including the Greater Grace church and the Students of Christ in Ashgabad – have got nowhere with their application. Catholic sources have told Forum 18 that their Ashgabad parish will lodge its registration application as soon as the text of the statute has been agreed with the Vatican.

Reached on 4 October, Maral Bayramova, an official of the Adalat Ministry's registration department, told Forum 18 that Turkmenistan's religion law sets out the procedure for registering religious organisations. Asked why the Baptists' registration has not been completed and why other religious communities' applications have stalled she said the quality of the telephone line was so poor that she could not hear the question. She insisted that under ministry procedures she was not authorised to give out any information but denied that information on registration of religious organisations was secret. She then put the phone down.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan 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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