

31 March 2005

TURKMENISTAN: Heavy fines for registered but "illegal" Baptist worship

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

Despite being members of their nationally-registered Church, five Baptists in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) were fined two months' average wages in late March to punish them for holding a small service which the secret police claim was "illegal". If they fail to pay by 10 April, the fines will be doubled, Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. When the service was raided, officers insulted one Baptist, asking her why she was a Christian and insisting that it would be better for the Baptists to follow the Islamic faith of their forebears. "The security police don't even know the new religion law which allows us to meet," one Protestant complained to Forum 18. "They just wanted to make fun of the Baptists."

Five members of a small Baptist church in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) were given heavy fines in late March in punishment for meeting for "illegal" worship, despite the fact that the congregation belongs to the registered Baptist church. If the fines are not paid by 10 April they will be doubled. Protestant sources who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service that two of the church members and their families have also been kicked out of the state-owned hostels where they lived.

Trouble for the five – Narmurat Mominov and four others - began in the evening of 1 March, after two other people joined a service the five were holding in a hostel where one of the Baptists lived. Local authority, police and National Security Ministry secret police officers raided the service, but presented no identification documents.

When the Baptists showed the officials a copy of the Baptist Church's registration certificate issued by the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) ministry in the capital Ashgabad – which describes the Church as working in the whole country – the officials rejected it, insisting the Baptists were meeting "illegally". The secret police officers claimed the certificate was invalid as it related only to the Baptist congregation in Ashgabad. "The security police don't even know the new religion law which allows us to meet," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They just wanted to make fun of the Baptists."

One of the two Baptist women present was insulted by the officials, who also confiscated her identity document. "They asked her why she was a Christian, telling her 'We have our own religion'," Protestants told Forum 18. "The officials told the Baptists it is better to be of the Islamic faith like their forebears." The officials confiscated Christian materials, including a tape, a copy of a Turkmen-language New Testament and a Bible, and several booklets.

The five were removed to the police station, where their fingerprints were taken. They were held for five hours and pressured to write statements about why they had become Christians and what religious activity they were involved in. All five were eventually freed after midnight, but told to report again the following morning with their identity documents.

When they returned to the police station they were met by officials from the prosecutor's office, who explained that if the Baptists' registration was indeed in order they would not be punished. However, the case was then handed to the secret police, which continued to seek punishment.

The five were later handed administrative fines each of 1,500,000 manats (approximately 380 Norwegian kroner, 45 Euros or 60 US dollars at the street exchange rate, though nearly five times as much at the vastly inflated official exchange rate), to be doubled if they failed to pay by the 10 April deadline. Average wages in Turkmenistan are below 30 US dollars per month. The fines appear to have been levied under Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violations of the law on religion.

The Baptists believe the two people who also attended the 1 March service might have been spies for the authorities, though Forum 18 has been unable to verify this. However, Baptists insist that none of their congregations in Turkmenistan have anything to hide.

Protestant sources say that in general, restrictions on their activity have eased in recent months, so they were surprised by the harsh moves against the Turkmenabad Baptists. One of those fined had been summoned by the secret police while visiting his home village last January, where he was pressured by secret police officers and the head of the local administration, who accused him (wrongly) of being a Jehovah's Witness. The secret police told him they would never get official permission to operate, but if they

worked "quietly and not actively" they would not face problems.

This contrasts with earlier years, when Protestants were among religious believers fined, beaten and sacked from their work in retaliation for their religious practice.

Although the Baptist Church was among four religious minority communities granted a registration certificate last summer after intense international pressure, for months the Adalat Ministry refused to complete the registration by granting the official stamp the Church needed to issue any official documents. However, this has now been handed over. Similarly, the Adventist Church registered at about the same time was for more than half a year denied permission to rent premises in Ashgabad for worship. However, this obstruction was removed earlier this year (see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521).

However, the activity of registered communities remains restricted, with officials insisting that no religious meetings can be held in private homes. Registered congregations are also pressured to subscribe to the grotesque cult of personality around the country's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, which focuses particularly on the two-volume book the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul) which he claims to have written (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Members of other faiths have complained to Forum 18 that the registration process has once again come to a halt. "The authorities are only prepared to register those groups that had registration in Soviet times," one leader who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. "Our registration was lodged last summer and we've heard nothing about any progress. When we ask they say 'you're not the only ones' and 'we've got lots of other work to do'. Still, they can't complain we're refusing to register." (END)

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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY