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TURKMENISTAN: Threats and fines follow break-up of Baptist Sunday service

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Angered by the presence of many children, secret police, police, procuracy and city administration officials broke up the Sunday morning service of a Baptist church on 11 May, held in a private flat in the city of Turkmenbashi. They threatened to confiscate the flat and deprive the parents of their parental rights. One official who participated in the raid has rejected Baptist complaints about the raid and said he expected the Baptists to be fined. "There were no violations of the law in the actions of the authorities," administration official Shanazar Kocheev insisted to Forum 18 News Service. "This was an illegal meeting and we broke it up." The Baptists have called on the procuracy "to defend our constitutional rights to believe in God and to confess our religion".

One of the five law enforcement officers who raided the Sunday morning service of a Baptist church held in a private flat in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) on 11 May has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that he and his colleagues did nothing wrong. "There were no violations of the law in the actions of the authorities," Shanazar Kocheev, head of the city administration department for letters and complaints, told Forum 18 from Turkmenbashi on 15 May. "This was an illegal meeting and we broke it up." The Baptists reject accusations that their service broke the law. In a 12 May letter, they called on the city procuracy to "assist in halting the illegal actions" of the officials, "as well as to defend our constitutional rights to believe in God and to confess our religion".

Kocheev told Forum 18 that by participating in an "illegal meeting", the Baptists broke Article 205 of the Administrative Code, which punishes "violation of the law on religion". He said the Baptists' "violations" are now being considered by the administrative commission of the city khyakimlik (administration), of which he is a member. He added that he expected them each to be fined 250,000 manats (340 Norwegian kroner, 43 Euros or 50 US dollars), the average monthly wage, by the end of today (15 May).

When Forum 18 pointed out that Turkmenistan's laws do not ban meetings by unregistered religious communities, Kocheev responded: "First of all, the Baptists make no secret of the fact that they're not prepared to register. Secondly, they regularly hold such meetings, which is not acceptable."

A 12 May report from church members reaching Forum 18 declared that the church had gathered for "joint prayer and reading of the Bible" at the flat of church member M. Sheldkret. At about 10.30 am, the five officials burst in "under the guise of verifying the passport regulations". In addition to Kocheev, the Baptists named the other officials as local police officer Esen Berdyev, Araz Tekae, who handles religious affairs at the khyakimlik, secret police officer Dovlat Charyev, and procuracy official Murad Amanov.

"They checked the identity document of the host and then began a search of the flat: the bathroom, toilet, cupboards, shelves, and other rooms," the Baptists complained in their 12 May letter to the procuracy. Kocheev then asked Sheldkret to introduce her guests. "After greeting them, they broke up the service, very angry at seeing many children. They threatened to deprive the parents of their parental rights, summon people to an administrative commission and deprive the owner of her flat." The officials accused the Baptists of holding an "illegal gathering" and told them they were breaking article 205 of the administrative code.

They then ordered Sheldkret to send her guests away, although not before asking who was the leader of the church and writing down personal details of all those present, including children. They threatened to take one of those present, Vladimir Lemeshko, to the police station and to take "appropriate measures" against him if he did not stop serving the church.

While five officials conducted the raid, a further twelve were waiting at the ground floor entrance to the block. The Baptists reported that they had been summoned by Amanov of the procuracy "to break up the meeting".

The Turkmenbashi congregation belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where it operates. Its congregations in Turkmenistan face constant

harassment from the authorities, which regard all their activities as illegal.

The Baptist church in Balkanabad was raided by the National Security Committee and the police in March and April and children of church members were interrogated and threatened in school (see F18News 11 April 2003).

Even had these Baptist congregations wished to register that would have been impossible: the highly restrictive religion law requires each individual religious community seeking registration to have 500 adult citizen members who live in one district of a city or one rural district. In addition, there is an unpublished ban on registering congregations of any faiths other than Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox.

Some believers have been imprisoned, while others have been forced either to hide in their own country or leave for exile abroad. Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, Baha'is, Jews and even the Armenian Apostolic Church have been denied any public religious activity (see F18News 17 March 2003).

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY