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TURKMENISTAN: Religious freedom survey, October 2005

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

In its survey analysis of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service reports on the almost complete lack of freedom to practice any faith, including denials of the right of legally registered religious communities to worship. In a typical example of this approach - which other religious minorities have also experienced - police raided a legally registered Baptist church in northern Turkmenistan, claiming that "individuals can only believe alone on their own at home." Unregistered religious activity continues - in defiance of international human rights agreements - to be attacked. There has been an increase in attempts to impose a state religious personality cult of President Niyazov on all Turkmen citizens, with mosques being particularly targeted. Turkmenistan continues to fail to implement its international human rights commitments, and also continues to take direct governmental action to deny religious freedom to peaceful Turkmen citizens.

Turkmenistan regularly claims that religious freedom exists in the country, one example being Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov's statement to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in August 2005. However, in practice, people in Turkmenistan are not permitted by the government to practice a faith or belief alone or with others, to meet freely for worship and spread their religious beliefs, or to freely choose to change their beliefs. The government tries to control the extremely limited legal religious activity it permits, which often does not - even for registered religious groups - include the right to worship. All unregistered religious activity remains banned and the government actively tries to suppress such activity along with its attacks on registered activity.

Places of worship have been confiscated and destroyed in recent years, while those still open are tightly restricted - with many faiths not being allowed any place of worship. Sharing religious beliefs in public and in the media is impossible, while formal religious education, apart from at a basic level, within places of worship or elsewhere is impossible. The exception to this is a small Muslim theological faculty in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], and this faculty has this year had all its foreign (Turkish) staff expelled, its student numbers reduced, and its status downgraded. Religious believers have been fired from their jobs because of their faith, evicted from their homes and harassed, fined and beaten for meeting - even in private homes - for unsanctioned meetings.

The changes to the religion law in March 2004 to allow small religious communities to register has allowed about nine previously "illegal" religious communities to gain legal status. But this seems to have been a move purely for purposes of foreign publicity, as it is rendered worthless due to government refusal to allow religious communities to meet, especially outside Ashgabat.

The March 2004 changes to the religion law and the subsequent registration by the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry of some religious minority communities, together with the removal of criminal penalties for unregistered religious activity - which came under strong international pressure - were much trumpeted by the Turkmen government. The state's record has encouraged religious communities to view the changes with suspicion (eg. see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521). Unregistered religious activity remains an administrative offence and state agencies have continued to behave as if unregistered religious activity was still a criminal offence.

The statistics given by Foreign Minister Meredov showed the limited impact of the changes. He said there are 91 registered Muslim communities, 12 registered Russian Orthodox communities, plus about nine registered communities of other faiths. A special commission attached to the Adalat Ministry is entrusted with processing registration applications, he added. It is believed this commission includes representatives of law enforcement agencies and other ministries.

Maysa Sariyeva of the Adalat Ministry department that registers religious communities and non-governmental organisations told a conference in Ashgabat on 19 August that her ministry has registered 118 religious communities. Sariyeva did not specify which denominations the 118 registered communities belong to and, contacted by Forum 18 in the wake of the conference, refused absolutely to give any information on registered communities or the numbers who have sought registration in vain. Significantly, she reminded conference participants - who came from a range of civil society groups and international organisations - that all activity by unregistered NGOs and religious communities remains illegal.

Strangely, in its written submission to the CERD, the Turkmenistan government had spoken of 382 mosques, 12 Orthodox churches and houses of prayer of other faiths in the country, without further explanation. The latest figures for registered religious

communities are likely to be more accurate. Shirin Akhmedova, then an official of the Adalat Ministry, told Forum 18 in March 2004 that 152 religious communities currently had registration, 140 of them Muslim and 12 Russian Orthodox. She admitted that far more religious communities had registration before 1997, when the harsh restrictions on registration came in. In 1997 there were some 250 registered Muslim communities, as well as communities of many other faiths.

However, the 12 Russian Orthodox communities cited by officials are known to have been refused re-registration up to the present time, because the Turkmen government has tried to pressure the Russian Orthodox Church to take the Turkmen parishes from the jurisdiction of the Central Asian diocese based in Tashkent in neighbouring Uzbekistan and put them directly under the Patriarch of Moscow. Patriarch Aleksii wrote to President Niyazov in July 2005 politely rejecting this proposal. A Moscow-based priest familiar with the situation told Forum 18 in July that he personally believes President Niyazov is trying to create "independent Orthodoxy" in Turkmenistan. "He wants the Orthodox Church to exist, but a Church that is in his hand, just as he has done with Islam." (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=603).

Appeals from the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod for the parishes to be re-registered have gone unanswered. Given the refusal to re-register the parishes, it remains unclear why government officials continue to include them in the statistics they give out.

There are signs that the international community increasingly does not believe Turkmen official statements. The CERD in August 2005, whilst noting what it called "the relaxation of registration rules in 2004," was unimpressed by Turkmenistan's human rights claims and amongst its recommendations pointedly called on the government "to respect the right of registered and unregistered religions to freely exercise their freedom of religion, and register religious groups who wish to be registered."

Despite the government's emphasis in its report to the CERD that Article 154 of the Criminal Code punishes "obstructing the exercise of freedom of conscience and religion", Forum 18 is not aware of any government officials punished for organising or taking part in harassment of religious communities, whether beatings, threats, detention, fines, demolition or seizure of places of worship, confiscation of religious literature or denial of the right to travel for religious purposes.

In the wake of the government's proclaimed liberalisation in 2004, harassment of religious communities continued. On 29 March 2004 President Niyazov told officials of the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs – which runs the Muslim community for the government – that he was handing over three new mosques to it and that no further mosques would be allowed. This appears to bar both Sunni and Shia Muslim communities that have been denied registration from taking advantage of the relaxation of the harsh registration requirements.

Religious meetings continued to be raided (with a new wave in summer 2005 which saw Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees harassed), places used for worship have been confiscated or demolished and believers have been beaten, fined, detained, deported and sacked from their jobs in punishment for religious activity the government does not like. Some believers have been given long prison sentences in recent years for their religious activity (most of them Jehovah's Witnesses, though all of them have now been freed) or have been sent into internal exile to remote parts of the country.

Jehovah's Witness sources have expressed concern to Forum 18 that although their last conscientious objectors imprisoned for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience were freed in April 2005, the lack of any alternative service means that any of their young men could still be arrested at any time.

Turkmenistan's restrictions on religious activity come despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion (repeated in the March 2004 presidential decree and reiterated to the UN CERD). Yet whilst the CERD was in session, police raided a registered Baptist church in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] claiming that "Individuals can only believe alone on their own at home." (see F18News 18 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=632).

Forum 18 was told that when church leaders strongly disputed this, the police were unable to find Article 11 of Turkmenistan's constitution, which reads: "The state shall guarantee the freedom of religions and confessions and their equality before the law. Religious organisations shall be separate from the state and may not fulfill state functions. The state education system shall be separate from religious organisations and shall be of a secular nature.

Everyone shall have the right independently to define his attitude toward religion, to profess any religion or not profess any either individually or jointly with others, to profess and disseminate beliefs associated with his attitude to religion, and to participate in the practice of religious cults, rituals, and rites."

This police raid on a legal religious community was a further indication of the emptiness of official claims that Turkmenistan's constitution and legal system defends human rights.

Turkmenistan's restrictions on religious freedom also break its international human rights obligations. Freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in the requirements for membership of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN, as well as being within the international human rights conventions which Turkmenistan has voluntarily signed. The country has pointedly failed to respond to repeated requests from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jahangir,

to be allowed to visit the country to investigate the religious freedom situation for herself.

In her annual report covering 2004, Jahangir noted that her repeated requests for further information about specific violations of religious freedom had elicited only one bland response from the government with no information on the specific cases she was seeking further clarification on. The government response merely claimed that her facts "did not correspond to the reality".

With a dictatorial ruler, who has appointed himself for life, President Saparmurat Niyazov (who likes to call himself "Turkmenbashi" or Father of the Turkmen), Turkmenistan already suffers from an absence of political and social freedom. State control was tightened even more in the wake of a failed assassination attempt on the president in November 2002, which some observers believe may have been staged to provide a pretext for repression.

Niyazov's rule is characterised by a grotesque cult of personality, with ever-present statues and portraits. Works published in his name – especially the two volume ideological book, the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which officials have likened to the Koran or the Bible – are compulsorily imposed on schools and the wider public. Russian Orthodox priests and Sunni Muslim imams are forced to quote approvingly from it in sermons and display it prominently in places of worship. One Ashgabat mosque has a dedicated Ruhnama room. The personality cult includes a massive mosque built at taxpayers' expense in the president's home village of Kipchak, in southern central Turkmenistan, decorated with quotations from the Ruhnama, a gold statue in Ashgabat that revolves to follow the sun and a monument to the Ruhnama.

The government-enforced cult of Niyazov's personality was stepped up at the beginning of the year, with Muslims facing mounting pressure to venerate the Ruhnama and local officials insisting that Russian Orthodox churches must have a minimum of two copies of it in parish libraries. Also important in the President's cult are his books of poetry, and Muslim clerics were told in February 2005 that "it was a priority task for clergymen to disseminate the lofty ideas in our great leader's sacred books on the duties of parents and children". An apparently full-time official at the massive Saparmurat Haji mosque in the village of Geok-tepe near the capital Ashgabat is present to "remind" the imam which pages of the work he is to read from at prayer times (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Some Muslims have objected to this attack on the content of Islamic belief. Anonymous anti-government leaflets circulating in Ashgabat in July 2004 contained calls for Muslims not to go to mosques where the Ruhnama is cited together with the Koran. There have been reports of attendance at such mosques declining.

One Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 in September 2004 that they had not applied for registration because they would not accept official demands made of other faiths to hang the country's flag and a portrait of the president in places of worship. "These are unacceptable demands," he insisted.

Religious parents – Muslim, Christian and members of other faiths - face a dilemma over whether to send their children to state-run schools. The Ruhnama plays a major role in the school curriculum from the very first year. (English, for example being taught using translations of the Ruhnama). The all-pervasive use of the Ruhnama, together with recitation of the oath of loyalty to the country and president, is objectionable to many religious parents do not wish to subject their children to what they see as blasphemous practices.

The oath of loyalty, which is printed at the top of daily newspapers, reads in translation: "Turkmenistan, you are always with me in my thoughts and in my heart. For the slightest evil against you let my hand be cut off. For the slightest slander about you let my tongue be cut off. At the moment of my betrayal of my motherland, of her sacred banner, of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi [Father of the Turkmen] the Great [i.e. President Saparmurat Niyazov], let my breath stop."

After the adoption in July 2002 of the law on guarantees of the rights of the child, the unregistered Baptist Church complained bitterly about Article 24 part 2 which declared: "Parents or the legal representatives of the child are obliged . . . to bring him up in a spirit of humanism and the unshakeable spiritual values embodied in the holy Ruhnama." Pointing out that officials are promoting the Ruhnama as "the last word of God to the Turkmen people", the Baptists declared: "In practice this law is a direct infringement on the freedom of conscience of citizens professing faith in Jesus Christ or another faith not recognised by the state."

Orthodox Christians echo the Baptists' concerns, telling Forum 18 that the issue has put Russian Orthodox priests in a difficult position. "Worried parents have come to their priests," one Orthodox Christian reported. "The priest can't tell his parishioners not to send their children to school. All he can do is tell them to do as their conscience dictates." Some parents have begun to teach their children privately at home.

Turkmenistan's deliberate isolation from the outside world and the punitive measures taken against those engaged in unauthorised religious activity make religious freedom reporting very difficult. Believers often fear retribution for reporting their difficulties, and so Forum 18 is unable to give the names or identifying features of sources within the country.

Religious activity is overseen by the secret police's department for work with social organisations and religious groups. This department, formerly the sixth department of the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police, is one of the six or seven main departments of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police and was created when the KNB was restructured in late 2002. The

social and religious affairs department of the secret police is believed to have 45 officers at the headquarters in Ashgabad, with a handful of officers in each local branch.

People known to be active in religious communities are recorded with the security agencies locally and can be summoned at any moment for interrogation. "All our believers are on file at the MSS secret police and we are treated as though we have a criminal record," a Hare Krishna devotee told Deutsche Welle in July 2005. The Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation reported that since August 2005, the secret police in Ahal region have been summoning young men who go to the mosque five times a day for prayers. It also reported that the MSS secret police summoned the parents of a devout Muslim conscript who prayed regularly in his military unit and warned that they should extract a statement from him declaring that he was renouncing his faith.

Local MSS secret police officers regularly summon Muslim and Orthodox clerics to report on activity within their communities. Some believers have told Forum 18 that the MSS also runs "spies" in each Muslim and Orthodox community, sometimes as many as half a dozen. In addition to their spies – who attend the religious community solely at MSS behest to gain information – there might be another ten or fifteen believers who are regularly interviewed by MSS officers and forced to reveal details of the community's religious life.

The MSS secret police and the ordinary police also try to recruit spies in unregistered religious groups, such as with the attempted recruitment of a member of a Baptist church they had detained in June 2003 in the north-eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew).

The Gengeshi for Religious Affairs – which is headed by an imam, Yagshimurat Atamuradov – has nominal responsibility for religious affairs, and has a headquarters in Ashgabad and branch offices in each of Turkmenistan's five velayats (regions). The Gengeshi's main job appears to be approving clerical appointments in the Sunni Muslim and Orthodox communities. "Imams are chosen by the Gengeshi and are then approved by the president," one source told Forum 18. Niyazov confirmed this in March 2004, when he instructed Gengeshi officials to make sure they appointed all imams, warning them not to allow local believers to do so.

Places of worship of a variety of faiths have faced demolition – as with numerous mosques most recently in 2004, as well as the Adventist church in Ashgabad in 1999 and two Hare Krishna temples in the eastern Mary region in 1999 – and confiscation – as with the Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Ashgabad in 2001. The six mosques were demolished in Ashgabad in autumn 2004 and one was turned into a police outreach post. The imam of one of the demolished mosques – 40-year-old Abdylla Geldymuradov – was held for several days by the MSS for interrogation. His father Shirmolla, an imam in a village near Ashgabad, was also harassed, the exiled Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation reported. No compensation has been offered to the Muslims, Adventists or Hare Krishna communities and the authorities have refused to return confiscated places of worship.

It was only with difficulty and after six months' effort that Ashgabad's Adventist community could find somewhere to rent for worship after regaining registration in 2004 after seven years. Yet renting somewhere for worship – even for registered communities – can be highly difficult. One director of a government-owned house of culture in the capital Ashgabad told Deutsche Welle in July 2005 that the city authorities had warned him and fellow directors in the city that providing premises for religious minorities is "unacceptable".

Unregistered religious communities face regular raids by MSS secret police officers, backed up by ordinary police officers (especially from the 6th Department, which notionally counters terrorism and organised crime), officials of the local administration and local religious affairs officials, who work closely together in suppressing and punishing as criminal all unregistered religious activity. Summer and autumn 2005 saw a spate of new raids on Jehovah's Witnesses, with one, Konstantin Vlaskin, detained for two weeks in Turkmenabad in July, raids, threats, beatings and fines and even the refusal to continue medical treatment on one (see F18News 13 September 2005). When in July 2005 police raided the private home in Turkmenabad where unregistered Baptists gather regularly for Bible study and prayer, they beat the host, Asiya Zasedatelevaya, with her own Bible and even threatened to hang her (see F18News 29 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=621).

But congregations of registered religious communities have faced similar raids. Anti-terrorist police raided the Sunday worship service of the registered Baptist church in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] on 14 August 2005. After the service, police questioned church members, confiscating all Turkmen-language Bibles and hymnbooks. The police took particular interest in children at the service, and were disappointed they were in the service with parental permission. Interrogation of church leaders followed, with officers insisting the Baptist Church's national registration in Ashgabad did not extend to other towns (see F18News 18 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=632).

Baptist congregations in Turkmenabad and Mary (see eg. F18News 10 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=582) and a Pentecostal congregation in the port city of Turkmenbashi ([Türkmenbashi] formerly Krasnovodsk) faced similar raids earlier this year (see F18News 31 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=535). In July 2005 local authorities warned Hare Krishna devotees in the Mary region not to meet for religious rites in private homes, despite the fact that the Hare Krishna community also has registration.

Even the two major faiths – the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church – face government meddling and require

government approval for the nomination of all officials. In January 2003 President Niyazov ousted the Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek who had led Turkmenistan's Muslims for the previous ten years, and replaced him with the 35-year-old Kakageldy Vepaev, someone widely believed to be more pliant. However, he too was soon ousted and Rovshen Allaberdiyev was appointed the new chief mufti in August 2004.

In the wake of his dismissal, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah apparently lived quietly in his home town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] until his arrest in January 2004, apparently accused of being an accomplice in the apparent November 2002 assassination attempt. An MSS secret police-compiled "confession" allegedly written in prison by the chief plotter, Boris Shikhmuradov, alleged that the former chief mufti had been a key associate with the code name "Rasputin". Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment at a closed trial in Ashgabad in March 2004. The government has refused repeated international requests to make the verdict public. It remains unclear whether he was punished for his lack of enthusiasm for the president's book the Ruhnama, for taking part in the plot, or as a prominent member of the Uzbek minority (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

Vepaev then took over Nasrullah's role in enforcing the president's religious policy. His dual role – as a Muslim leader and a state official (he was also one of the deputy chairmen of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs) – became all too apparent during the crackdown on Protestant and Hare Krishna communities in spring 2003: he personally took part in raids on Protestant churches in Ashgabad and in follow-up meetings at hyakimliks (local administrations) when church members were questioned and threatened. In a similar move, local mullahs have frequently been involved in raids on local religious minorities elsewhere in the country – most recently in August 2005 on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Turkmenabad - threatening them and calling them to renounce their faith and, if they are ethnic Turkmens, to "return" to their ancestral faith.

Sunni Muslim mosques are reported to have seen attendance slump as, in response to government orders, imams placed copies of the Ruhnama in mosques with equal prominence as copies of the Koran. At least one mosque has been closed down after its imam refused to put the Ruhnama in a place of honour. The grand mosques constructed on the president's orders – and with state funds – are likewise reported to be largely empty, as Muslims decline to regard them as places of worship. Imams are, at least in theory, required to recite the oath of loyalty to the president and country at the end of the namaz (daily prayers). President Niyazov told Muslims in 2000 that they were to renounce the hadiths, sayings attributed to the Muslim Prophet Muhammad which do not appear in the Koran but are valued by devout Muslims.

On 1 July 2005 Niyazov told his cabinet that Turkmen Muslims had their own way of praying and ordered the publication of a list of common religious rituals for all Turkmens. "Officials from the Ministry of State Security secret police are going around mosques identifying Muslims who perform religious rites in a way that differs from Turkmen practice," Khaitbai Yakubov told Forum 18 from neighbouring Uzbekistan of what was happening in ethnic Uzbek-populated regions of Turkmenistan.

Devout Muslims have expressed concern about the government-sponsored ousting of imams who have theological education in favour of those who have never been formally educated in Islam. In the past, imams were educated in neighbouring Uzbekistan, but that appears to have come to a halt. Even in areas dominated by Turkmenistan's ethnic Uzbek minority, such as in the Dashoguz region of north-eastern Turkmenistan, the authorities have ousted ethnic Uzbek imams and replaced them with ethnic Turkmens.

Muslim education has become almost impossible in recent years. The madrassah (Islamic college) in Dashoguz was ordered closed in 2001, leaving the Faculty of Muslim Theology at Magtymguly Turkmen State University in Ashgabad as the only institution in Turkmenistan authorised to train imams. In 2002 the president set limits on the number of students who could study there. These were further reduced under a 30 June 2005 decree passed by President Niyazov, which also ordered the merger of the Theological Faculty with the History Faculty from the new academic year beginning in autumn 2005, with the theological section now merely a sub-department with 55 students.

Foreign lecturers, who were all Turkish, were forced to leave the country to be replaced by local, less qualified teachers. Under a decree issued by the education ministry on 5 July, 20 students were expelled from the preparatory department of the Theological Faculty. A local staff member at the faculty described the enforced cut-back to Forum 18 in July 2005 as "a virtual catastrophe for us" (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614).

One source told Forum 18 that the decline in the level of education among practising imams has led to a growth in respect for the artsakal, or traditional religious leaders. "They have preserved their authority and people go to them for weddings and funerals," the source reported. "The authorities don't attack them."

Government tolerance of Sunni Islam has not extended to Shia Islam, which is mainly professed by the ethnic Azeri and Iranian minorities in the west of the country who are traditionally more devout than ethnic Turkmens. Shia mosques failed to gain re-registration during the compulsory round of re-registration in 1997 after the adoption of the much harsher law on religion. Judging by the president's remarks in March 2004, they also appear unable to apply for registration now. An unregistered Shia mosque in Turkmenbashi was raided in December 2003 as local Shias commemorated the death of the former Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev.

The president's dislike of Shia Islam has also extended into history. Among the accusations levelled at the writer Rahim Esenov was that he had correctly portrayed Bayram Khan, a sixteenth-century regent of the Mughal Empire and the hero of one of his novels, as a Shia rather than a Sunni Muslim. Niyazov had warned Esenov in 1997 to amend his text, but the writer had refused to comply. Detained in early 2004, national security officers repeatedly asked him about why Bayram Khan was depicted as a Shia. Freed from prison in March 2004 under international pressure, Esenov awaits trial accused of inciting social, religious and ethnic hatred under Article 177 of the criminal code.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which is nominally under the control of the Church's Central Asian diocese led from the Uzbek capital Tashkent by Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim), is in fact under the direct control of the Ashgabad-based priest Fr Andrei Sapunov, widely regarded with suspicion by members of the Orthodox Church and other Christian faiths who have suffered from his actions.

The Turkmen government tries to isolate the local parishes from the Tashkent diocese and the wider Russian Orthodox Church. In recent years, three or four priests who are Russian citizens who the diocese wished to send to serve in Turkmenistan have been denied visas. Church delegations to Turkmenistan from both Tashkent and Moscow have in recent years been forced to reduce the numbers of participants. President Niyazov and successive chief muftis (as leader of the largest faith in the country) have refused to invite Patriarch Aleksii to make a pastoral visit to Turkmenistan.

However, although Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education, Russian Orthodox men from Turkmenistan are allowed to study for the priesthood at the Tashkent seminary.

In an echo of the practice in Sunni Muslim mosques, Orthodox priests reportedly received instructions from the end of 2000 to quote from the Ruhnama in sermons and to "preach to us about the virtues of living in Turkmenistan and of the policies of Turkmenbashi," one parishioner complained.

Close to President Niyazov, Fr Sapunov frequently deploys the extravagant personal praise of the president required of all officials. Many Orthodox regard such statements as close to blasphemy. Some Orthodox have told Forum 18 that they have evidence he passes information received in the confessional - which the church teaches he should never reveal to anyone - to the secret police.

In addition to his duties in the Church, Fr Sapunov is also one of the deputy chairmen of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, with particular responsibility for Christian affairs. This gives him an official power of veto over the affairs of other Christian denominations. He is also well-known in the secret police, even to local officers outside Ashgabad, and has praised a ban on the importation of literature from Russia, which includes a ban on the official Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate. During numerous raids on Protestant churches in different regions, MSS secret police officers have told the Protestants that they must gain permission from Fr Sapunov before they can operate.

Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which dates back to the Soviet period, specifies fines for those refusing to register their religious communities of five to ten times the minimum monthly wage, with typical fines of 250,000 Turkmen Manats (363 Norwegian Kroner, 44 Euros or 48 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Fines can be doubled for repeat offenders. Many believers of a variety of faiths have been fined under this article, including a series of Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees last year after the series of raids on unregistered religious meetings.

There is a Catholic mission in Turkmenistan, based at the Holy See's Nunciature in Ashgabad. However, at present Catholics can only celebrate Masses on this Vatican diplomatic territory. The priests have diplomatic status.

One of the biggest religious communities that has been denied registration is the Armenian Apostolic Church. An estimated fifteen per cent of those who attend Russian Orthodox churches are said by local people to be Armenians, although the Armenian Church is of the Oriental family of Christian Churches, not of the Orthodox family. "Sapunov told parish priests to accept Armenian believers," one local Orthodox told Forum 18. However, the Orthodox Church would stand to lose a sizeable proportion of its flock were the government to allow the Armenian Church to revive its activity.

The one surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian church - in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi - is said to be in a "sorry state of repair". The Armenian ambassador to Turkmenistan has repeatedly sought permission for it to be restored and reopened as a place of worship but in vain. When the Armenian priest last visited from neighbouring Uzbekistan he had to conduct baptisms and hold services in the Armenian embassy in Ashgabad. Asked at the UN CERD meeting in August about why no Armenian Apostolic communities had gained registration, Foreign Minister Meredov said this was because no application had been submitted and claimed that if the Church does submit an application there is no reason for it not to be approved.

The obstructions to travel abroad have made it difficult to take part in international gatherings. In March 2004 border guards took two female Jehovah's Witnesses off the aeroplane at Ashgabad airport while on route to a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Kiev. They were barred from leaving the country.

This January's pilgrimage to Mecca, the haj, as in previous years, saw only 188 pilgrims allowed to travel, far below the quota

allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities. One Ashgabad imam reported that he knew at least one person who had been on the haj waiting list for at least 10 years and who found out that somebody else who had been on the waiting list for less than 2 years went on the haj by paying a bribe.

Believers who want to receive information from fellow-believers abroad face virtually insurmountable obstacles. Access to the Internet is possible only via state providers that exert strict control over what information can be accessed. The majority of international religious websites are simply not accessible by an Internet user in Turkmenistan. Moreover, a special computer program searches emails for coded words that could be used to send "unreliable information", while "a suspicious message" will simply not reach the addressee.

Religious literature is no longer published in Turkmenistan. Mosques and Russian Orthodox churches often have small kiosks where a limited quantity of literature is available. A typical Orthodox church bookstall might have a few prayer books, small icons and calendars, with the Bible available only erratically – and often, at about 12 US Dollars [62,400 Turkmen Manats, 78 Norwegian Kroner, or 10 Euros], too expensive for the badly-paid local people. Supplies of religious literature and articles to Orthodox churches are equally erratic, with no official distribution of books, icons, candles and baptismal crosses.

Customs officers sometimes allow travellers returning to the country to bring in a small quantity of religious literature for personal use. However, one Orthodox believer told Forum 18 that on at least five occasions known to him, Orthodox priests had had literature taken from them at the border on their return to the country. Hare Krishna devotees, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained to Forum 18 they cannot import religious literature. Religious literature is routinely confiscated from members of unregistered religious minorities during police raids on their homes.

Orthodox believers trying to receive alternative information are in a more difficult situation than Sunni Muslims. Under a September 2002 presidential decree, direct subscription to Russian newspapers and magazines, including religious publications such as the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, is banned in Turkmenistan. Even Orthodox priests do not receive the Journal regularly, being forced to rely on old copies they pick up when they are visiting Moscow or Tashkent.

Of the Russian television channels, only a few hours a day of the ORT channel are broadcast, and then only with a day's delay after programmes have been approved by a censor. Currently there are a number of broadcasts on Russian television covering Orthodox issues. The broadcast of Russian cable programmes is forbidden in Turkmenistan, so that unlike in other Central Asian states, local Orthodox believers cannot use this as an alternative source of religious news. Richer local people try to evade these restrictions by installing satellite receivers.

Officials have not simply restricted themselves to banning the receipt of political information from the former metropolis. Purely religious communications between local Orthodox believers and Russia have inevitably also been obstructed. As Turkmenistan has become even more isolated from Russia, individual Orthodox believers have become more isolated from the Moscow Patriarchate.

Much religious activity has of necessity to be shrouded in secrecy, with believers of having to hide their faith and worship from the knowledge of intrusive state officials. In response to the pressure, all unregistered communities have seen the numbers of their active members fall. Yet despite the severe controls and the threat of punishment, the religious believers practice their various faiths as best they can, while waiting for better times.

Governmental attacks on religious freedom in Turkmenistan are wide-ranging and permeate society. For religious freedom to be a reality, the Turkmen government would have to:

- 1.) implement in full the international human rights commitments it has freely accepted, such as the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 – to which all OSCE states are committed – which states the binding importance of "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief";
- 2.) respect and defend the right of all individuals and religious communities – whether registered or unregistered – to exercise their right
 - a.) to freedom of religion or belief, to worship and witness,
 - b.) to not change (or change) a religion or belief
 - and c.) to join together and express a religion or belief
- 3.) register all religious communities that wish to apply for registration;
- 4.) cease attacking unregistered religious activity, including abolishing all legal barriers to peaceful religious activity;
- 5.) stop interfering with the beliefs and internal affairs of religious communities, including their internal personnel appointments;

- 6.) stop imposing a religious personality cult of the President on citizens;
- 7.) end ordinary police and secret police raids on religious meetings, whether in private homes or elsewhere;
- 8.) end interrogations and fines of peaceful religious believers;
- 9.) compensate people punished by the state for peacefully practising their faith;
- 10.) reinstate believers fired from their jobs for their membership of religious communities;
- 11.) bring to legal accountability all those responsible for attacking citizens' religious freedom;
- 12.) allow believers to publish and distribute religious literature;
- 13.) and permit believers to freely give voluntary religious education.

Only if the authorities implement, and not continue to break, the international human rights obligations they have voluntarily accepted, will religious believers in Turkmenistan believe that the situation has changed for the better. (END)

Reports of the religious freedom situation in Turkmenistan can be found at
<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

Previous Forum 18 Turkmenistan religious freedom surveys are at <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=32>

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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