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TURKMENISTAN: Religious activity leads to Baptist's deportation

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

A Baptist who is a Russian citizen, Aleksandr Frolov, was deported from Turkmenistan on 10 June because of his religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local Baptists told Forum 18 that Frolov's latest problems began after he visited Russia. After he returned, three officials came to his home and confiscated his Residence Permit. The officials gave their reasons as his attempt to import Christian literature, failure to notify the Migration Service of his exit from the country, and the holding of worship services in his home. Frolov separates him from his wife, a Turkmen citizen, their three year old son, and five month old daughter at their family home. Local Baptists have called for prayers and appeals for Frolov to be allowed back to his home and his family, for local Baptists to be allowed to hold worship services freely, for an end to restrictions on receiving Christian literature and for believers to be able to travel freely to visit other congregations.

A Russian citizen, Aleksandr Frolov, was deported from Turkmenistan on 10 June because of his religious activity as a Baptist, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Frolov's deportation separates him from his wife, a Turkmen citizen, their three year old son, and their five month old daughter at their family home in Turkmenabad [formerly Charjew] in eastern Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan's state Migration Service, in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], declined to discuss Frolov's deportation. "We can't respond to such questions by telephone," an official in the agency's headquarters told Forum 18 on 14 June before putting the phone down. The telephone at the Consular Department of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry for the Lebap region (which includes Turkmenabad) went unanswered on 14 June.

The Russian Embassy in Ashgabad has also declined to comment on the case. The Embassy switchboard told Forum 18 that any such deportation is "a consular matter" and referred the enquiry to the Consular Department. However after being given the details of the case, an official of the Consular Department, who did not give her name, refused to say what, if anything, the Embassy would do to help Frolov. "I am not authorised to give out such information," she told Forum 18 on 14 June and then put the phone down.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 13 June that Frolov's latest problems began early this year, after he visited Russia. On his return via Kazakhstan, Christian literature he was bringing back with him was confiscated by Turkmen border guards.

On 24 March, soon after his return, three Migration Service officials, led by Senior Lieutenant Merdan Melebaev and an official of the department that registers foreign citizens, came to Frolov's home and confiscated his Residence Permit. The officials gave their reasons as Frolov's attempt to import Christian literature, failure to notify the Migration Service of his exit from the country, and the holding of worship services in his home. "These three accusations were made to him verbally," Baptists stated.

Under a new Migration Law adopted in December 2005, foreign citizens living in Turkmenistan must inform the local office of the Migration Service where they live, and if they go abroad or travel within the country. However, the Law does not make clear how long such visits must last before the Migration Service must be informed of the visit. Current Hare Krishna prisoner of conscience Cheper Annaniyazova – a Turkmen citizen - was jailed in November 2005 for seven years, after being accused of three offences, two of which related to illegally crossing the border in 2002. The third charge has not been made public. Many others who did what she did were not charged, she stated (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690). It is believed within Turkmenistan that the jailing was inspired by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 3 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=754).

The deportation of Frolov from Turkmenistan took place on 10 June and his Residence Permit was cancelled. Local Baptists have called for prayers and appeals for Frolov to be allowed back to his home and his family in Turkmenabad, for the local Baptist congregation to be allowed to hold worship services freely, for an end to restrictions on receiving Christian literature and for believers to be able to travel freely to visit other congregations.

Frolov – who has intermittently received deportation threats in recent years - was among a number of church members fined in June 2003 after a police raid on the Turkmenabad Baptist congregation. Although officials again threatened him with deportation, the threat was not carried out at that time. The raid came during a particularly intense wave of anti-religious activity, when many Protestant, Hare Krishna and Jehovah's Witness communities were subjected to raids, fines and other harassment (see F18News 25

June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=91).

Baptists also complain of the recent denial of exit permission to local Baptist and former religious prisoner Shageldy Atakov, who was taken off the Moscow flight on 25 May by MSS secret police officers at Ashgabad airport, shortly before departure (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790). The Baptists told Forum 18 on 13 June that the Migration Service has still not responded to Atakov's letter asking why he has been banned from leaving his homeland.

Frolov and Atakov are both members of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register their congregations in any of the former Soviet states, arguing that such registration amounts to unwarranted state interference in their religious activity. The Baptists complain of what they call "unceasing persecution" in Turkmenistan. "Our believers of our brotherhood there are not allowed to conduct services peacefully, their meetings have been broken up, those present have been fined and sometimes beaten, and several have even been deported from the country and their homes confiscated. Those who love Christ have tolerated this only because this has allowed them to bring salvation to dying sinners."

Many registered and unregistered religious communities regard state registration – made more possible as part of an alleged "liberalisation" of government policy – with great dislike, as registration brings with it oppressive conditions (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787).

At least six Baptist families were among the estimated hundreds of Muslim, Christian, Hare Krishna and Jehovah's Witness believers deported from Turkmenistan - mainly in the second half of the 1990s - in retaliation for their religious activity. Almost all of these were foreign citizens living and working in Turkmenistan legally, though at least one was a Turkmen citizen. The deportations are part of a long-standing policy of isolating religious believers from their co-religionists abroad, which also includes denial of entry visas to foreign citizens wishing to visit religious communities in Turkmenistan (see F18News 26 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=439). Also, the number of Muslims allowed to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca is severely restricted by the government (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711). (END)

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

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

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