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TURKMENISTAN: Family concerned over imprisoned former Chief Mufti

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

Increasingly concerned about the fate of the imprisoned former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah is his extended family, who live in the northern region around Dashoguz [Dashhowuz], Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We have never once been allowed a meeting, never once have they accepted parcels for him and we don't even know where he is being held," one relative complained. No verified information on the whereabouts or state of health of the 59-year-old Nasrullah has been received since he was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment at a closed trial in Ashgabad in March 2004. Relatives say rumours he was freed at the time of last October's prisoner amnesty are not true. No officials have been prepared to discuss Nasrullah's case with Forum 18. Forum 18 knows of no other individuals currently imprisoned for their religious activity.

The extended family of imprisoned former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, in his home region of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in northern Turkmenistan, is becoming increasingly concerned that it has heard nothing of him, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We have never once been allowed a meeting, never once have they accepted parcels for him and we don't even know where he is being held," one relative complained. Family members say rumours that Nasrullah had been freed at the time of last October's prisoner amnesty are not true. No official was prepared to discuss Nasrullah's case with Forum 18.

Nasrullah – who turned 59 on 10 December 2006 and is from Turkmenistan's ethnic Uzbek minority – studied Islam during the Soviet period at the madrassah in the Uzbek city of Bukhara, then in Syria and Egypt. He became Chief Mufti after Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991, and was loyal to the then President Saparmurat Niyazov. However, the President removed him without explanation as Chief Mufti in January 2003.

In March 2004 Nasrullah was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment, apparently on treason charges, by the court of the Azatlyk district in the capital Ashgabad after a closed two-day trial. The first five years were to be served in a high security prison. The government has repeatedly refused to give any details about the crimes they allege he committed and which articles of the Criminal Code he was sentenced under, or to release the text of the verdict.

Conflicting reports on Nasrullah's whereabouts have emerged in recent years. Deutsche Welle claimed in May 2004 that Nasrullah was among a number of prisoners severely beaten in prison in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk), though this report could not be verified independently (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349). There has been no verified news of Nasrullah since he was sentenced. His name was not in the officially-published list of those amnestied in October 2006 and he was not among the handful of other prisoners the government said it freed at the same time.

Turkmenistan's most recent other religious prisoner was Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova, imprisoned in 2005 for illegally crossing the border, after she went to live in the Hare Krishna commune in Kazakhstan despite being refused an exit visa. But she was freed from the women's labour camp in Dashoguz in October as part of the annual prisoner amnesty, though she has since been barred from leaving the country (see F18News 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=860).

Although Turkmenistan offers no alternative to compulsory military service and has imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses in the past (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725), none are currently known to be imprisoned.

In the wake of the death of the autocratic President Niyazov in December, religious believers in Turkmenistan have been watching for any signs of a new religious policy and an end to restrictions on religious communities (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894).

The new President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, took his oath of office on 14 February on a copy of the Koran and Niyazov's work the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which has long played its part in the late President's grotesque cult of personality, including being foisted on religious communities (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522). Forum 18 has been unable to find any state official prepared to say what the

new President's religious policy will be.

Since the death of Niyazov, Forum 18 has not heard of any raids on or harassment of religious communities, though one member of a religious minority has been denied permission to leave the country. This appears to show that the exit ban list – which has prevented many individuals prominent in religious communities from leaving their own country – is still in force. (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 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