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TURKMENISTAN: "The Constitution is only a scrap of paper for the Turkmen authorities"

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Turkmenistan has raided a Christian young people's summer camp organised by two legally registered churches, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Participants - particularly ethnic Turkmens - were arrested, insulted, threatened and had personal Bibles confiscated. When camp leaders pointed out their rights to meet under Turkmenistan's Constitution, officers insulted the Constitution. "To put it mildly, the Constitution is only a scrap of paper for the Turkmen authorities," one Protestant complained to Forum 18, "while the Church's legal status means even less." Elsewhere, others have been pressured to sign statements that they will not meet for worship, and two Protestants were fired from their jobs because of their faith. Registration - and hence the right to carry out activities legally - remains impossible for many religious communities, and re-registration is being used as a weapon to stop religious activity. However, the Justice Ministry has after 13 years registered the Catholic congregation in the capital Ashgabad. But strict censorship and border controls are still being imposed on all religious literature and religious believers.

A Christian youth summer camp organised by two Pentecostal churches in the village of Sekiz-Yab near Geok-tepe north-west of the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] was raided by the authorities on 22 July, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service from Turkmenistan. Participants were insulted, pressured and threatened. Elsewhere in Turkmenistan, others have been pressured and threatened because of their faith. Ethnic Turkmen members of non-Muslim groups come under particular pressure, two Protestants being fired from their jobs because of their faith.

Registration - and hence the right to carry out activities legally - remains impossible for many religious communities. However, after 13 years of waiting, the Justice Ministry finally registered the Catholic congregation in Ashgabad.

No one was available on 30 July or later to discuss these cases at the Justice Ministry, the government's Gengeshi [Council] for Religious Affairs or the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights.

Summer camp raided

The young people's summer camp in Sekiz-Yab had been organised by Light of the East Church in the northern town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz], and Word of Life Church in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew). Both these churches have obtained state registration.

The day the camp began, the police jeeps kept driving up and down nearby so that the camp could be observed, the exiled Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights stated. Police then entered the camp claiming that a shepherd had been murdered nearby. The police then detained and questioned all 47 participants, including two pastors, taking them to Geok-tepe police station. There people in civilian clothes interrogated camp participants, making no mention of any murder. Questions focused on when they had become Christians and who was financing them. They were photographed, fingerprinted and their personal Bibles were confiscated. They were not freed until the following morning.

Police warned the leaders that they had not informed the government's Gengeshi [Council] for Religious Affairs that they were holding the camp. The leaders responded that they do not need special permission for church members to meet together in the countryside.

Officers who raided the camp drew up a list of all those present and, Protestants told Forum 18, insulted and swore at participants. When camp leaders pointed out their rights to meet under Turkmenistan's Constitution, officers insulted the Constitution. "To put it mildly, the Constitution is only a scrap of paper for the Turkmen authorities," one Protestant complained to Forum 18, "while the Church's legal statute means even less. The officers told them directly and bluntly that they will do everything to ensure that there are no Christians left in Turkmenistan."

All those present were subsequently summoned for interrogation, where they were intimidated "using psychological pressure".

Protestants told Forum 18 that ethnic Turkmen participants were singled out for harsh treatment. The mother of one ethnic Turkmen participant was summoned to the police station, where she was held hostage until her son presented himself for interrogation.

Renewed pressure to sign statements not to worship

Several members of the Path of Faith Baptist church in Dashoguz were summoned on about 19 July to the Regional Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, where they faced "psychological pressure" to sign statements that they would no longer attend worship in the church, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 from Dashoguz. Officials told the church members that Turkmenistan "is a Muslim country" and that they would do everything to ensure that Christians did not exist in the country. Joining Gengeshi officials were officers of the ordinary police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police.

Turkmenistan's former Chief Mufti, Rovshen Allaberdiyev, who is now imam of Dashoguz Region as well as being the senior regional Gengeshi official, raided the church's Sunday worship service on 20 December 2009. He was accompanied by a police officer and three other officials who did not identify themselves. Christian books were confiscated and church members were pressured in an attempt to get them to sign statements that they would stop attending worship services (see F18News 1 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1401>).

Pressure on ethnic Turkmen non-Muslims

As ethnic Turkmen non-Muslims at the summer camp experienced, officials frequently insult or pressure ethnic Turkmen people belonging to non-Muslim religious communities. Pressure via employers is a frequent tactic.

In two typical cases, two Protestant Christians were sacked from their employment because of their faith in summer 2010, one in state employment, the other in private employment, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 in June. They asked that the locations of the two not be given.

The state worker - who worked in the health sector - was visited at home by the local imam, the police and the MSS secret police, who confiscated a personal Bible. The Christian had become known as a church member after being identified on a photo of participants at a 2009 Christmas worship service. "We don't know how the authorities got hold of the photo," one Protestant told Forum 18. "Maybe they have a spy among us."

State officials frequently also have dual roles as clergy in their struggle, along with the MSS secret police, to suppress freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 13 October 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361>).

The privately employed worker's employer told the Protestant that they "did not need problems" before they fired them. Church members interpreted this as meaning that pressure from officials had been put on the business owner.

Legal status impossible to gain for many

Path of Faith Church in Dashoguz is among a number of Protestant churches in Turkmenistan to have applied for state registration without success vain in recent years. Normal religious activities such as meeting for worship are regarded as "illegal" without state registration (see F18News 1 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1401>).

Another Protestant congregation, Peace to the World Pentecostal church in the south-eastern town of Mary, has heard nothing since early 2010 about its registration application, its pastor Ilmurad Nurliev told Forum 18 on 30 July.

The church first applied in 2007, had to "correct" its application three times in 2009, and lodged what it hoped would be an acceptable application at the beginning of 2010. "The Justice Ministry told us we had to give our application to the Gengeshi [Council] for Religious Affairs for them to approve first," Pastor Nurliev told Forum 18. "They keep saying they are 'considering' the application, and that they've had many visits from commissions from abroad which take up their time so that they haven't had time to devote to it."

Re-registration applications used to stop religious activity

Ashgabad's Pentecostal Church has been in legal limbo since 2008, when it applied to the Justice Ministry to record the change of pastor, change of legal address and to re-register a revised statute. "They won't re-register the congregation, so it makes the legal status unclear," one Protestant told Forum 18. "This means it can't rent property because the authorities will say: you don't have registration any more."

An affiliated congregation of the Pentecostal church in another city was visited by the MSS secret police in 2008 after the re-registration application was lodged, and told not to meet until re-registration had been granted. They were asked to sign statements that they would not meet until then. This has made the congregation afraid to meet as a community.

The authorities' have long used of registration and re-registration to limit or stop religious activity. This has led many in Turkmenistan to question whether registration is worthwhile, and to describe government claims that freedom of religion or belief exists in the country as "fictitious" (see the personal commentary at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728>).

Strict border controls

Pastor Nurliev of Peace to the World church is among a number of active religious believers unable to leave Turkmenistan as they are on the government's exit blacklist (see F18News 2 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403>).

Those who are able to leave Turkmenistan face frequent check-ups of their luggage in their return, when religious books and other items are often taken. Forum 18 has learnt that at the ferry port in Turkmenbashi in May, students returning to Turkmenistan from higher education colleges in Azerbaijan had framed verses in Arabic from the Koran confiscated by border guards.

The customs hall at the ferry port used to display an instruction in Turkmen and Russian from the Gengeshi that bringing religious books, "cult objects" and "other" religious items was not allowed. Although this notice was removed in early 2009, controls on passengers and confiscation of religious items has continued .

Exit bans - including a total ban on Muslims taking part in the 2009 haj - literature confiscations are part of the state's policy to isolate religious believers from fellow-believers in other countries (see F18News 2 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403>).

Conference on Sufi poet without the possibility of reading his works?

Turkmenistan imposes strict censorship on all religious literature, administered by the Gengeshi (see F18News 12 May 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294>). One of the consequences of this is that participants in an official conference on a Muslim poet are unlikely to be able to obtain his works. Following a presidential decree, a conference on a noted twelfth-century Sufi Muslim poet, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, is being planned in September by the Academy of Sciences and the Makhtymguli Institute of Language and Literature. Yasawi lived in what is now Kazakhstan and was a major influence in Central Asia.

Bairam Taganov, a member of the conference organising committee, told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 24 May that two books of Yasawi's works had been published in Turkmen in the country since independence. One was a collection of writings on mysticism in the Sufi tradition, published in the mid-1990s, and the other a collection of about 100 of his poems. "Both were published some years ago, so I don't know if they are still in bookshops," he told Forum 18.

Asked whether these works would be republished or others would be published to allow readers in Turkmenistan interested in his works to have access, Taganov responded: "I don't know." He was unable to explain why they were not available and what was preventing their publication.

Taganov was unable to say whether Yasawi's influence on today's Muslim community in Turkmenistan might be discussed.

Registered after 13 years

However, after 13 years of waiting, the Justice Ministry has registered Ashgabad's Catholic congregation on 12 March, the Holy See's nuncio to Turkey and Turkmenistan Archbishop Antonio Lucibello told Forum 18 from Ankara on 26 July. "I explained to them that having diplomatic relations with the Holy See means they recognise the Catholic Church," he told Forum 18. "This is the juridical basis to recognise the Church in Turkmenistan as a body that depends on the Holy See."

He said the authorities had finally conceded that the Catholic community was not able to abide by the requirement that the leader of a religious organisation must be a Turkmen citizen. Turkmenistan has no native Catholic priests. Fr Andrzej Madej, the Polish priest who has headed the Mission in Turkmenistan since 1997, has been recognised legally as its leader.

Archbishop Lucibello said he had just returned from Ashgabad, where in a meeting with Justice Minister he had taken the opportunity to thank the government for granting legal status to the community. He said the Catholic church has not faced difficulty gaining entry for foreign clergy, gaining exit for local Catholics to go on pilgrimage abroad, or for clergy to bring religious literature into the country with them.

Welcoming the state registration, Fr Madej told the Rome-based Catholic missions news agency Fides on 15 July: "Now we can think about asking government permission to build the first church for our Catholic community. We are already the 'living stones' of the local Church, but we would like to have a place in which to assemble for prayer." So far, the parish has had to meet in the chapel of the nunciature, which has diplomatic status. This status allowed it to function from 1997.

Fr Madej told Fides that the newly recognised Catholic community now hopes to retrieve possession of a Catholic Armenian church

in Turkmenbashi, in the west of the country. This survived Soviet rule, but is in a desolate state. The Church also hopes to reclaim another small church building at Serdar (formerly Gyzylyarbat) in south-western Turkmenistan, which is today a coffee bar. (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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>>.

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