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TURKMENISTAN: Protestant pastor's trial set for 21 October

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev is due to begin trial in Turkmenistan on the morning of Thursday 21 October, nearly two months after his arrest, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The criminal trial in Mary is on charges of large-scale swindling, with a penalty of up to five years' jail. His wife and church members vigorously deny the charges, and insist that the five people named as making accusations are not as the indictment claims church members. Three of them only attended the church a few times, and the remaining two are unknown. Other accusations vigorously denied are that Pastor Nurliev is a drug addict in need of treatment; he is a diabetic and - as she has not been allowed to see him - his wife is very concerned about his health. They also refute an allegation that he is unemployed and lives off the earnings of others, as he worked - until his arrest - as a barber. "Up to 20 church members will try to attend - all are ready to speak up to defend my husband," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18. She has asked the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in Ashgabat to send independent monitors to the trial. The Church has stopped meeting for worship after the arrest.

After nearly eight weeks in pre-trial detention, the criminal trial of Protestant Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev is due to begin on the morning of 21 October, his wife and lawyer both confirmed from the south-eastern town of Mary. The case is due to be heard at Mary Court under Judge Akjaev. "Up to 20 church members will try to attend - all are ready to speak up to defend my husband," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 News Service. She says the indictment - which she finally managed to obtain only on 16 October - falsely states that her husband is a drug addict who needs treatment. She says he has not touched drugs since his conversion to Christianity in 1999.

Meanwhile, unlike in 2009, Turkmenistan's government has announced that a group of pilgrims will be allowed to take part in the Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca in November - but only 188 people. And it appears that as in earlier years, would-be pilgrims will not be able to take part outside the small, government-approved group (see forthcoming F18News article).

The telephone of Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], went unanswered on 18 October. Also unanswered was the telephone of Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, Director of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, as well as those of her colleagues.

The prosecution of Pastor Nurliev comes two months after the latest imprisonment of Jehovah's Witness young men who are unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. The two new prison terms handed down in August brought to seven the number of religious conscientious objectors serving terms of imprisonment, with a further two serving non-custodial sentences (see F18News 4 October 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1495>).

Pastor's trial imminent

A 45-year-old grandfather of two, Pastor Nurliev leads the Light to the World Pentecostal Church in Mary. The church has been repeatedly denied registration since 2007, the same year that Pastor Nurliev was placed on the country's exit blacklist without officials explaining why (see F18News 2 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403>).

Since his arrest at his home in Mary on 27 August, Pastor Nurliev has been held with about 40 other prisoners in a cramped investigation cell. His wife has been unable to see him since his arrest and remains concerned for his health, as he is under treatment for diabetes.

Pastor Nurliev faces trial on charges of swindling a large amount of money from citizens under Article 228, Part 2 of the Criminal Code, which carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment and confiscation of property. Money and a certificate as a preacher which he gained in 2006, seized during his arrest, have still not been returned.

Maya Nurlieva has asked the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in Ashgabat to send independent monitors to attend her husband's trial. The OSCE Centre told Forum 18 in September it is "closely following" the case (see F18News 10 September 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1487>).

Indictment's false accusations?

The 11-page indictment, signed by police investigator Durdimurad Gazakov and Mary town police chief K. Byashimov, includes several unfounded assertions in addition to the accusation of drug-addiction against her husband, Maya Nurlieva complained. She says it also alleged that she and her husband do not work and live off the tithes of church members. She told Forum 18 that her husband works as a barber, while she works in a factory.

The indictment alleges that Pastor Nurliev extracted money from five church members. Two women testified against him in writing, while three men gave verbal testimony, the indictment says.

His wife and church members vigorously refute the accusations, saying that the two female accusers came to church meetings only a handful of times and one never gave any money, while the other gave 46 Manats (98 Norwegian Kroner, 12 Euros or 16 US Dollars). Of the three men, two are people they have never heard of. 15 church members who came to the Church's Sunday worship service on 29 August - two days after the arrest - signed an appeal to the Prosecutor's Office testifying to Pastor Nurliev's innocence (see F18News 30 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481>).

The third male accuser named in the indictment is Pastor Nurliev's former school teacher who later became an alcoholic and was rejected by his family. "He even stayed with us for a week back in 2007 and Ilmurad helped him with clothes and even crockery," Nurlieva said. "But he has not attended the church since 2007 and never gave any money." She continues to insist that the arrest and prosecution is designed to punish her husband for his religious activity.

Police applied heavy pressure - including threats that her husband would be fired from his job - against another church member to falsely testify against Pastor Nuriev, but she refused to do this (see F18News 30 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481>).

Pastor Nurliev's new lawyer told Forum 18 on 15 October that earlier that day he had been able to meet his client in the investigation prison. "His spirit was strong," the lawyer noted. He said he did not know whether the trial will be completed within one day or whether it might extend over several sessions.

Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 that the church has chosen to stop meeting for worship, after her husband's arrest.

Exit blacklist persists

Pastor Nurliev is one of a number of religious believers known to have been placed on the exit blacklist preventing them from leaving the country (see F18News 2 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403>). Other religious believers have been denied the possibility of leaving on specific occasions, though without apparently ending up on the permanent exit blacklist.

The exit blacklist is run by the Migration Service, sometimes in conjunction with the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police who can also impose exit bans (see F18News 31 May 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790>). The exit blacklist is part of the Turkmen government's long-standing policy of trying to isolate religious communities within the country as far as possible from their fellow-believers abroad (see F18News 19 November 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219>).

Members of one religious faith, who asked that it not be identified, told Forum 18 in September that some of their fellow-believers were not allowed to leave Turkmenistan during the summer to take part in religious events abroad.

Other religious believers on the list include members of the immediate family of former Baptist prisoner Shageldy Atakov. The latest family member to be added to the list was his brother Hoshgeldy Atakov. He was prevented from boarding a flight to Moscow at Ashgabad airport in February 2010, not long after he converted to Christianity and his home was raided by officers of the MSS secret police. "They wouldn't give him any reason for why he couldn't travel," Shageldy Atakov told Forum 18 from the town of Kaakhka on 20 September. He said his brother has been told he still cannot travel abroad.

"They knew my brother had converted not long before," he added. "Then the MSS secret police came and confiscated religious literature from him and told him not to read it." Shageldy Atakov told Forum 18 that soon after the raid, literature confiscation and travel ban his brother had stopped participating in church activity. "All this influenced him. He was afraid."

The official who answered the phone at the State Migration Service in Ashgabad refused absolutely to discuss with Forum 18 how individuals end up on the exit blacklist, why no official reason is given for this and why such people include religious believers. "We don't answer any such questions by telephone," she told Forum 18 on 18 October. "Come along and talk to our Head." She then put the phone down. (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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