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TURKMENISTAN: "Rape these women," police chief orders

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

Violence by officials against religious minorities appears to be routine in Turkmenistan. Two of the most recent cases known to Forum 18 News Service are assaults on two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Durdygul Ereshova and Annajemal Tuyliyeva, who were beaten by a police chief in the capital, Ashgabat, and threatened with rape. Although they were not raped, they were maltreated for several days before being freed, Tuyliyeva having a ring stolen by police, whilst Ereshova had her passport confiscated and is being threatened with internal deportation to a remote part of Turkmenistan. The duty officer at the police station where these assaults happened - who would not give his name - merely laughed at Forum 18's questions about the maltreatment and put the phone down. As Jehovah's Witnesses commented to Forum 18, "these officers are tolerated and even supported by higher authorities, such as judges, prosecutor's offices, duty police officers, district police officers, and city administration officials."

After their detention in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] on 7 October, Jehovah's Witnesses Durdygul Ereshova and Annajemal Tuyliyeva were beaten by the police chief of the city's Niyazov district, Aymuradov (first name unknown), who ordered they be taken down to the basement and raped, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. Although they were not raped, they were maltreated for several days before being freed, while Ereshova is being threatened with internal deportation to a remote part of Turkmenistan. Reached on 22 November, the duty officer at the Niyazov district police station - who would not give his name - merely laughed at Forum 18's questions about the maltreatment and put the phone down.

The Jehovah's Witnesses say the detention and rape threats were part of a new crackdown on their activity in Turkmenistan in October. "Some individual officers of the law enforcement agencies, especially of the 6th Department of the Interior Ministry, that allegedly handles organised crime and terrorism, shamelessly express their hatred of Jehovah's Witnesses," they told Forum 18 on 18 November. "These officers are tolerated and even supported by higher authorities, such as judges, prosecutor's offices, duty police officers, district police officers, and city administration officials." They complain that even possessing Jehovah's Witness literature is enough to trigger persecution, while victims' complaints are either ignored or dismissed.

Counter-terrorist officials have also targeted other religious minorities, such as Baptists, this year (see F18News 2 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=623>). The use of violence by officials against religious minorities is frequent (see eg. F18News 29 July 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=621>), including the use of rape threats (see F18News 15 October 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=432>).

On the morning of 7 October, Ereshova and Tuyliyeva were discussing their faith with another person in a flat when the district police officer detained them and took them to the Niyazov District police station. There police chief Aymuradov began swearing at them "profusely", the Jehovah's Witnesses report, and beat Tuyliyeva on her head with a book. Since Tuyliyeva suffers from epilepsy and a fit could start at any minute, Ereshova attempted to intervene. Police chief Aymuradov then hit Ereshova in her face and began kicking her and throwing her around the room, knocking chairs over in the process. Then he continued beating Tuyliyeva and shouting that the women should be taken to the basement to be raped. When they were about to be taken downstairs, the enraged Aymuradov again attacked and kicked the women.

After the beating, Ereshova and Tuyliyeva were interrogated separately. After what the Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "a few provocative questions", an officer of the 6th Department, Merdan (last name unknown), began hitting Ereshova on her head with a book. Then he questioned Tuyliyeva, who was on the verge of an epileptic fit and unable to talk until she had taken some medicine. The two women explained that they both had children at home alone, but Merdan dismissed their concerns. The women were held for much of the day until being sent to an investigation centre.

The duty officer there first refused to accept Ereshova and Tuyliyeva, because of errors in the paperwork. However, the police officer explained that this was requested by police chief Aymuradov and that the investigation centre personnel should prepare whatever paperwork was necessary themselves. The documents showed that the two women had been arrested for "illegal religious activity" and vagrancy. Having handed in their valuables, they were put into a cell together with prostitutes and drug addicts. Soon they were interrogated again, this time by Yazmurad (last name unknown), the chief of the investigation centre. They were held in the centre for three days.

On 10 October, Ereshova and Tuyliyeva were again taken to the Niyazov District police station for interrogation. Tuyliyeva was released after her sister said she would file a complaint with higher authorities. Ereshova's husband tried to get her released, and police officers, among them Merdan, took the opportunity to extort 200 US Dollars from him. This is a very large sum in Turkmenistan, as the minimum monthly wage is 1,500,000 Manats (1,936 Norwegian Kroner, 246 Euros or 22 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The police also took Ereshova's passport from her husband, and more than a month later have still not returned it. She was kept in custody for a further day and finally released in the evening of 11 October.

When the valuables were returned, Tuyliyeva's gold ring was missing. When she threatened to complain to higher authorities, the police officers started accusing each other. After she repeated her demands, they collected money from among themselves and, instead of her gold ring, gave her 2,300,000 Manats (about 632 Norwegian Kroner, 80 Euros, or 94 US Dollars at the unofficial exchange rate).

Despite having a residence permit to live in Ashgabad, Ereshova is now being threatened with deportation to Lebap region more than 600 kms (370 miles) north east of the capital.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also state that more of their members have recently faced beatings, fines and confiscations of their religious literature. On the morning of 13 October, two police officers visited Jamilya Kerimova at work in Ashgabad and took her to her home. One of the officers, Murad (last name unknown), was from the 6th Department. They called for a police detachment of between five or six officers, and searched the house without a search warrant to authorise this.

All the religious literature the police found was carefully photographed, before it was confiscated and taken to the police station. Kerimova was taken to the 6th Department, where officers beat her on the head and stomach, using a chair, kicked her and banged her head against the wall. That evening she was driven to Ashgabad's Kopetdag District Court but, as no judge was then available, she was taken again to the court the next morning. On 14 October the judge who was then available (name unknown) fined her 150,000 Manats (about 40 Norwegian Kroner, 5 Euros, or 6 US Dollars at the unofficial exchange rate).

Several other similar cases are also known to Forum 18, including threats to throw Ashgabad-based Jehovah's Witness Murad Bayjaev, detained and beaten by anti-terrorist police on 14 October, who threw him into a cell full of convicts so that they would rape him. Police also threatened to exile him to the remote north-western port of Bekdash, which is in a desert area.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' open approach to spreading their faith, even in a country as hostile to religious freedom as Turkmenistan, makes them a highly visible target for the police and MSS secret police. Members of many other religious faiths, notably Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees, are punished for trying to practice their faith.

The most recent case known to Forum 18 was the 17 November sentencing of Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova to 7 years in jail by an Ashgabad court for crossing the border illegally (see F18News 17 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690>). Former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah is serving a 22 year sentence on charges the government has refused to make public (see F18News 8 March 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271>).

These are the only religious prisoners of conscience currently known to be in Turkmen jails. Violence and psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs are said to have been used against previous religious prisoners of conscience (see eg. F18News 25 October 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438> and 17 February 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514>).

The Russian Orthodox Church managed to get reregistration from the Ministry of Justice for its approximately eleven parishes in early November, after nearly two years of foot-dragging by the authorities, Forum 18 has learnt (see F18News 11 July 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=603>). Reregistration was compulsory after the Religion Law was tightened up against international human rights standards in November 2003 and according to the Law have been completed soon after.

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>>

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