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TURKMENISTAN: Border guards ban believers from leaving

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

Despite the claimed abolition of a requirement for permission to leave Turkmenistan, religious believers are still being denied permission to travel from the country. The latest cases known to Forum 18 News Service are two Protestants and one Hare Krishna devotee, who are being persistently denied permission to travel. The Protestants were not on the official exit blacklist, one source told Forum 18, but were stopped after border guards asked why they were travelling abroad and they said they were going to study the Bible in a neighbouring country. The Hare Krishna devotee, who was intending to visit a temple in Russia and meet fellow devotees, "doesn't know why he's on the blacklist", another source told Forum 18. Meanwhile, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Asma Jahangir, has this year again requested the Turkmen government to be allowed to visit the country - so far in vain. In situ visits are a "crucial aspect of the mandate on freedom of religion and belief", she insisted, expressing concern at Turkmenistan's failure to respond.

Despite the abolition of the exit visa requirement in January 2004, at least three religious believers are currently being denied permission to leave Turkmenistan for religious purposes, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Two Protestants have been banned from leaving since late September, while a Hare Krishna devotee has been banned from leaving since mid-October. It remains unclear how many religious believers are on the government's current exit blacklist.

Hare Krishna devotee Murad Uraev had a valid Russian visa and an air ticket for Moscow when border guards at the airport in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] stopped him just before boarding when they found his name on the computer exit blacklist. He had been intending to meet fellow believers in Moscow and visit the temple. He subsequently tried to reach Russia by taking a bus through neighbouring Uzbekistan, but was again prevented from leaving by border guards and sent back.

"He doesn't know why he's on the blacklist," one source who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 8 November. "He spent a lot of money on the Russian visa and the air ticket and now it's been wasted." The source said that Uraev had returned early in 2005 from India, where he had spent most of the previous year, and faced "a lot of questions" on his return.

The Protestants, who were from a church away from Ashgabad, had been leaving Turkmenistan for Bible studies in a neighbouring country. They had all the necessary documents with them, including visas for their destination country. "The two do not appear to have been on the exit blacklist," a church member told Forum 18 on 9 November, asking that the names, destination, place of residence and affiliation of the church not be published for fear of reprisals. "Border guards asked them on departure why they were travelling abroad and they gave the reason. Then they were barred."

Another source told Forum 18 that despite attempts to overturn the exit ban, the two still are not being allowed to leave the country. "They keep being told this will be resolved tomorrow, but all this has been dragging on for more than a month," the source told Forum 18 on 8 November. "Finally they claimed the order came 'from above' not to let them out. The border guards are violating the human rights of their own citizens."

The church member reported that this is the first such exit ban affecting this denomination since the exit visa requirement was lifted.

Members of other religious communities - who preferred not to be identified or have their religious affiliation given - confirmed that religious believers can and do travel abroad for religious purposes, such as attending places of worship, going on pilgrimage, taking part in conferences or meeting fellow believers. However, they do not report the purpose of their visit to border guards for fear of being barred from leaving.

Before the abolition of the exit visa requirement, believers of a variety of faiths were barred from travelling abroad. In 2003, nearly 50 Jehovah's Witnesses were denied exit visas to attend a convention in Tajikistan.

In March 2004, just two months after exit visas were abolished, two Jehovah's Witnesses were prevented from boarding a flight to the Ukrainian capital Kiev to attend a Jehovah's Witnesses conference because their names were on a blacklist. They were told to apply to the Border Service Headquarters in Ashgabad for further explanation (see F18News 23 March 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=285>). In April 2004, Deutsche Welle radio reported that five Jehovah's

Witnesses were removed from a flight from Ashgabad to Moscow because they were blacklisted and forbidden to leave the country.

In January 2005, an ethnic Russian Protestant pastor was stopped at a border crossing and was not allowed to leave for Uzbekistan. After waiting for a day for approval to cross, he gave up and returned home.

Turkmenistan has a record of claiming changes in its policies which make no practical difference to the realities faced by its citizens, as in the case of its alleged "relaxation" of requirements for state registration of religious communities (see eg. F18News 18 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=632>).

The Turkmen government has tried to isolate religious believers from their fellow believers abroad as part of the general aim of cutting the country off from the outside world. In the summer the government expelled all the Turkish Islamic teachers when it cut back on and downgraded the Faculty of Muslim Theology at Magtymguly Turkmen State University in Ashgabad, the country's only Islamic higher educational institution. The Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan - which is part of the Central Asian diocese based in neighbouring Uzbekistan - has faced pressure to cut ties with the diocese. Foreign religious delegations are usually denied visas (see F18News 18 October 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672>).

Fearing exposure of its repression of religious communities, the government also refuses to grant entry permission to Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief. In her 30 September 2005 report to the UN General Assembly (A/60/399), Jahangir reported that she had this year "reminded" the Turkmen government of the 2003 request for permission to visit the country. In response to her reminder, she reported laconically: "No reply". She said she regarded in situ visits as a "crucial aspect of the mandate on freedom of religion and belief" and expressed concern at Turkmenistan's failure to respond.

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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