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TURKMENISTAN: Jehovah's Witnesses interrogated and mosques demolished

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

Raids and other pressures against Jehovah's Witnesses are continuing, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, including the sudden detention and interrogation "in a verbally abusive manner" of Altyn Jorayeva and her three children, aged 8 years, 6 years, and 7 months old. Forum 18 has also learnt of further demolitions of mosques the authorities do not approve of.

Pressure continues, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, against Jehovah's Witnesses. Forum 18 has also learnt of two further mosque demolitions in the capital Ashgabad during the wave of destruction of mosques last October (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481).

Jehovah's Witnesses have complained they are still deprived of freedom of association and peaceful assembly, even in their own homes. "Police and national security officers interrupt small religious gatherings being conducted in private homes," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "They detain all in attendance, verbally abuse them, and at times brutally beat the detainees. Afterward those present are given heavy fines, with the owner of the home subjected to an even heavier fine." They also complained of continuing evictions of believers from their homes and dismissals from work.

On 12 November 2004, Bilbil Kulyyeva, a mother of four, was forcibly evicted from the hostel in Ashgabad where she and her children were living. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the eviction was ordered by the religious affairs department of Ashgabad city hyakimlik (administration) as punishment for her faith.

In other incidents against Jehovah's Witnesses late last year, on 19 October officers of the hyakimlik of Ashgabad's Azatlyk district forcibly took an underage boy Vladimir Rodionov from school to the hyakimlik. Without notifying his mother, Tatyana Rodionova, Vladimir was intensively interrogated and threatened in an attempt to obtain the addresses of his mother's fellow believers. He was forced to sign a statement that he would not attend Jehovah's Witness meetings with his mother.

In the evening of 29 September, Altyn Jorayeva, a Jehovah's Witness from the town of Seydi [Seydi], in northern Turkmenistan, and her three children were visiting a fellow believer Babakuly Yakubov in the village of Khojakenepsi in Farab district. Three other Jehovah's Witnesses - Shukurjan Khatamova, Rozyzhan Charyyev, and Oguldurdy Altybayeva - were also present. Suddenly, four policemen burst into the apartment without permission and without producing any personal identification documents. Deputy police chief Akhmetjan Alymov and Serdar Khuseynov searched the apartment for religious literature and confiscated any they could find.

Jorayeva and her children (8 years, 6 years, and 7 months old) were taken to the police station where she was interrogated by police chief Khemrayev "in a verbally abusive manner". As a result of threats and intimidation, her children were forced to utter the oath of loyalty to Turkmenistan's president Saparmurat Niyazov as well as to recite verses to him. "The children cried while doing this," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The family was released shortly before midnight.

On 13 October two of those present during the raid - Yakubov and Khatamova - were summoned to the hyakimlik's administrative commission and each fined 2,500,000 manats (3,055 Norwegian kroner, 369 Euros, or \$481 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). This is about 1.5 times the average monthly salary. "The commission was made up of eight persons who conducted themselves extremely impudently," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The chairman of the commission, Kh. Berdyev, also ordered hyakimlik official Abdull Charyyev to arrange for Yakubov to be dismissed from his work.

On 8 September another Jehovah's Witness, Gulzhemal Allagulyyeva from the Khojamb district of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou [Charjew]) region, was fined 1,250,000 manats (1,527 Norwegian kroner, 184 Euros, or \$240 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) for her religious activity. She was also forced to sign a statement that she would stop sharing her faith with others. Present at the administrative commission were an officer of the NSM secret police and two officers of the police's 6th department, which handles terrorism.

Sources in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 that two further mosques were demolished in Ashgabad in October 2004 in addition to

the four demolitions in the capital already reported (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481). Both were located in Shor-Garadamak in Azatlyk district of northern Ashgabad. "I found one of these mosques in a half-demolished state with no roof," one visitor to the site told Forum 18. "According to a sign hanging in front of the property, Azatlyk district police outreach unit will be built to replace this mosque. Nobody in the neighbourhood could clearly say why it was demolished." All six of these mosques were destroyed in the days running up to the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

In the wake of the demolition of the mosque near Ashgabad's Customs Clearing House, sources have told Forum 18 that two people were arrested for protesting against the demolition. The names of those detained are unknown and it is not clear whether they are still being held or whether they were punished for the protest.

The authorities continue to retain tight control over all Muslim activity. One Ashgabad imam, who preferred not to be identified, reported that the main imam for the city of Ashgabad, Hezretguly Khan, was dismissed in September 2004 because "some Wahhabis" had been found in the city. President Niyazov had spoken out against Wahhabis that same month, but it is unclear whether these are followers of the strict brand of Islam that predominates in Saudi Arabia or whether the term is being used more widely (as is common in Central Asia) for Muslims the government does not like. Khan was replaced by Mekan Akyev, a young graduate of the Turkmen State University's Theological Faculty.

This year's pilgrimage to Mecca, the haj, as in previous years, saw only 188 pilgrims allowed to travel, far below the quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities. One Ashgabad imam, who preferred not to be identified, reported that he knew at least one person who had been on the haj waiting list for at least 10 years and who found out that somebody else who had been on the waiting list for less than 2 years went on this year's haj by paying a bribe in US dollars.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY