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TURKMENISTAN: Former Chief Mufti released, Baptist prisoner of conscience still in jail

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Relatives and friends of Turkmenistan's former Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, local people in his northern home region and visitors from neighbouring Uzbekistan have held a traditional Turkmen "sadaka" (thanksgiving feast) to celebrate his release from prison, Forum 18 News Service has been told. "Very, very many people came," exiled Turkmen human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights told Forum 18. However, the other known religious prisoner, Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, has not been released. The family confirmed to Forum 18 today (13 August) that he is still being held in a labour camp with harsh conditions, and insist that he is being punished for his activity with his unregistered Baptist congregation. Several Jehovah's Witnesses have recently been given suspended jail sentences for refusing military service on religious grounds. Since Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov became President in early 2007, raids, fines, public threats, imprisonment and other violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief have significantly increased.

Relatives and friends of the former Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, local people in the northern region of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] and visitors from neighbouring Uzbekistan have held a traditional Turkmen "sadaka" (thanksgiving feast) to celebrate his release from prison and return home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Very, very many people came," exiled Turkmen human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin told Forum 18 on 13 August. "Everyone is delighted."

However, the other known religious prisoner in Turkmenistan, Baptist prisoner of conscience Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, has not been released. A 49-year-old Ukrainian citizen, he was transferred to a labour camp with harsh conditions in late June. His family confirmed to Forum 18 on 13 August that Kalataevsky is still being held in this camp. A Baptist leader from Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi], Kalataevsky was handed down a three-year term on 14 May 2007 for illegally crossing the border six years earlier. His family has insisted to Forum 18 that the sentence was imposed to punish him for his activity with the unregistered Baptist congregation in the city. They point out that this was the subject of police interrogation when he was arrested this March, and not crossing the border (see F18News 3 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=986).

A fellow Baptist pastor arrested with Kalataevsky, Russian citizen Yevgeny Potolov was expelled from Turkmenistan in early July (see F18News 18 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=996). Several Jehovah's Witnesses were recently handed down suspended sentences for refusing military service on religious grounds (see 26 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1000).

Since Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov became acting President in early 2007, raids, fines, public threats, imprisonment and other violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief have significantly increased (see, most recently, F18News 20 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=997).

Three years into a 22-year sentence, the former Chief Mufti of Turkmenistan was freed from prison as part of a Presidential Amnesty. He is among eleven prisoners named in an undated decree of clemency signed by President Berdymukhammedov. The text of the decree was made public on 10 August.

Farid Tukhbatullin, who heads the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, pointed out that Nasrullah is the only one of the 11 released prisoners to enjoy public influence, "not only as a religious leader, but in general." While he was unsure about the reason for the timing of the amnesty, he suggested that representatives of Muslim countries may have put pressure on Berdymukhammedov during his recent umra pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia (see F18News 23 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=946).

Tukhbatullin also thought it likely that Nasrullah will be under some sort of travelling restrictions and barred from speaking to diplomats or other official representatives, at least for a few months. While prison will inevitably have undermined the former Chief Mufti's health, the exiled human rights activist added, he "didn't look bad" in his state television appearance.

Nasrullah's relatives were informed of his imminent release on 9 August, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights website

<http://www.chrono-tm.org> reported. That afternoon, "the convicts were brought to the Interior Ministry where the decree was read out to them in the presence of their relatives," according to Russian news agency Interfax. Tukhbatullin confirmed reports that the eleven prisoners appeared on state television thanking the president for their release and promising to work for the good of the nation.

On 10 August the pro-government Turkmenistan.ru website cited the presidential press service as stating that Berdymukhammedov had issued the amnesty "taking into consideration numerous communications from citizens to the Turkmen Presidential State Commission for Consideration of Citizens' Communications Regarding the Activity of the Law Enforcement Agencies". The president's decision is reportedly also intended "to continue to strengthen the unity and cohesion of Turkmen society and accord and well-being in every family."

The Commission was set up on 19 February 2007, shortly after President Berdymukhammedov was sworn into office. Nothing certain is known about its composition, functions or powers. According to Farid Tukhbatullin, the former Chief Mufti's relatives persistently petitioned the Commission for his release as soon as it was created.

59-year-old Nasrullah is from Turkmenistan's ethnic Uzbek minority. He received his theological education during the Soviet period at the Mir Arab madrassah in Bukhara [Bukhoro] (Uzbekistan), Syria and Egypt. One of the most authoritative and influential Muslim theologians of Central Asia, Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf has told Forum 18 that when the pair studied together in Bukhara, Nasrullah "never participated in conversations in which there was even the slightest criticism of the authorities". The former Chief Mufti of Uzbekistan also described him as "a very cautious man who keeps away from politics" (see F18News 25 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=438).

Becoming Chief Mufti in the wake of Turkmen independence in 1991, Nasrullah remained loyal to then President Saparmurat Niyazov. In January 2003, however, he was retired by President Niyazov from his posts as Chief Mufti and Deputy Chairman of the Council (Gengeshi) for Religious Affairs, without explanation. In March 2004 he was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment following a closed two-day trial at Azatlyk District Court in Ashgabad. Prosecutors alleged that Nasrullah was involved in an assassination attempt on President Niyazov in November 2002. Reliable sources in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 they believe the former Chief Mufti was actually sentenced for his growing opposition to the then President's tight control over the Muslim community. In particular, he reportedly tried to obstruct as far as possible the use in mosques of Niyazov's moral code Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which imams are forced to display prominently in mosques and quote approvingly in sermons (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

The government has repeatedly refused to give any details about the crimes Nasrullah is supposed to have committed and the articles of the Criminal Code under which he was sentenced, or to release the text of the verdict. No official has been prepared to discuss with Forum 18 either Nasrullah's case or those of others held for their religious beliefs. Reached on 4 July, Murat Karriyev, the Deputy Head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs and reputedly its most important official, refused to enter any discussion (see F18News 4 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=987).

No verified news about Nasrullah was available during his imprisonment. The first five years of his sentence were to be served in a high security prison, and he was reportedly severely beaten in May 2004 at a prison in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk) (see F18News 25 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=349). Earlier this year members of Nasrullah's extended family said that they were becoming increasingly concerned for his welfare. "We have never once been allowed a meeting, never once have they accepted parcels for him, and we don't even know where he is being held," one relative complained (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=914). (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 more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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