

1 September 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Baptists to be fined for each service

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In the wake of the latest raid on a Baptist Sunday service in Balkanabad on 24 August, police have banned church members from meeting for services and threatened that if they do so they will be fined for each meeting. In July and August, all its members had already been fined 48 US dollars each. "The Baptists refuse to be registered, citing the fact that they are forbidden from having contact with the secular authorities," Balkanabad's procurator Berdy Shirjanov told Forum 18 News Service. "The law is the law. We have to fine the Baptists."

Police officers have banned members of a Baptist congregation in the town of Balkanabad in western Turkmenistan from meeting for services and threatened that if they do so they will be fined for each meeting, reports a statement from local Baptists reaching Forum 18 News Service.

The threats came in the wake of a raid during the Sunday service on 24 August. All those present were taken to the 6th division of the regional police department, the division that combats terrorism and religious extremism. "There, over three hours, conversations were held individually in separate offices with each one, demanding that they write statements," the 25 August Baptist statement declared.

The procurator for Balkanabad, Berdy Shirjanov, admitted that he was "aware" of the incident. "I'm also aware of the similar press releases issued by the Baptists after every police intervention," he told Forum 18 from the town on 29 August.

He claimed that there is complete freedom of religion in Turkmenistan, but added that according to the country's law on religion every religious community has to register. "The Baptists refuse to be registered, citing the fact that they are forbidden from having contact with the secular authorities," Shirjanov told Forum 18. "The law is the law. We have to fine the Baptists. I understand perfectly well that they are absolutely harmless people - they don't smoke or drink."

Despite Shirjanov's claims, the religion law makes no mention of any requirement for religious organisations to register.

The Balkanabad Baptist church has suffered several raids this year, including one on 11 May after which church members were threatened and insulted (see F18News 23 May 2003). The church complains that in the course of July and August, all its members were fined 250,000 manats each (363 Norwegian kroner, 44 Euros or 48 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The Balkanabad congregation belongs to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists), which split from the All-Union Council of Baptists in 1961 when further state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since. According to one of its pastors in Moscow, it has 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics. No faiths except for the officially-approved Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been allowed to register any communities. The government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal. Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and other Protestants, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutherans, the Jews, Hare Krishna communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and others are thus denied the opportunity of worshipping legally.

Since May, pressure on religious minorities has intensified with a series of raids on various communities, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, as well as Hare Krishna communities (see F18News 10 June 2003). In all these cases, the police burst into private apartments where representatives of religious minorities had gathered and took them to the police station.

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