

21 March 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Ex-KGB leads raid on Baptist church

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Eight officers raided the Sunday morning worship service on 16 March in the unregistered Baptist church in the city of Balkanabad. A statement from the church reaching Forum 18 News Service reports that the officers were led by Kadyr Meredov, the local officer of the National Security Committee (NSC, the former KGB) responsible for controlling religious groups. "They accused us of holding an unapproved meeting and violating the law on religious cults," the church complained. "They banned us from meeting until we had registered our church with the justice authorities, and warned us that otherwise, a police officer would be present at each of our services." Forum 18 was unable to find out from NSC or procuracy officials why the church had been raided.

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The officers drew up a document certifying that there had been an unapproved meeting and took the names, addresses and places of work of all those present, including children. It remains unclear if any of those who organised or attended the service will face charges under the code of administrative offences.

Because of the Novruz spring holiday, few officials were at their desks on 21 March. No-one answered the telephone at the city NSC. The duty officer at the regional NSC in Balkanabad rejected suggestions that NSC officers would have raided a church. "It cannot have been," the officer told Forum 18. "They could have been warned, but that wouldn't have happened inside a church, but maybe outside." Asked to give his name, the officer declared: "Why do you need my name? You know where you're ringing. We don't give names."

No-one answered the telephone on 21 March at the regional procuracy, but the duty official at the city procuracy, Bayram Bayramov, told Forum 18 that he knew nothing of the incident. Asked why the church had been raided if Turkmenistan's laws do not specifically forbid unregistered religious worship, he responded: "I don't know."

The Baptist congregation belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where it operates. Even had its congregations wished to register in Turkmenistan that would have been impossible: the highly restrictive religion law requires each individual religious community seeking registration to have 500 adult citizen members who live in one district of a city or one rural district. In addition, there is an unpublished ban on registering congregations of any faiths other than Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox.

Some believers have been imprisoned, while others have been forced either to hide in their own country or leave for exile abroad. Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, Baha'is, Jews and even the Armenian Apostolic Church have been denied any public religious activity (see F18News 17 March 2003).

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