

10 September 2010

TURKMENISTAN: Appeal for imprisoned pastor

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The wife of imprisoned Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, Maya Nurlieva, has expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service over his state of health in a smoky, overcrowded investigation cell, especially as he has no access to medical treatment for his diabetes. The 45-year-old grandfather has been accused of extracting money from three people, charges his wife and church members vigorously reject. She says police pressured the accusers. "All this is being done because of his faith." Local prosecutor Razmurad Durdiev defends the investigation. "No-one is being pressured to write statements," he claimed to Forum 18. Nurlieva called on international observers – including from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – to attend any trial, a request she put in person to the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad. The OSCE Centre told Forum 18 it is "closely following the developments regarding the case of Pastor Nurliev". Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's government has not yet revealed if it will allow any Muslims to undertake the haj pilgrimage to Mecca this year.

The wife of imprisoned Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev has appealed for international observers – including from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - to attend any future trial, if the investigation against him reaches that stage. "I want them to be there as witnesses to see that justice is done," Maya Nurlieva told Forum 18 News Service on 9 September from Mary in south-eastern Turkmenistan where her husband is being held. "He is innocent of the accusations against him and I want him back home. All this is being done because of his faith." She expressed concern that his detention in an overcrowded, smoky cell and denial of access to medicine for his diabetes could worsen his health.

Nurlieva added that she has written to President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov asking him to look into the case and professing her husband's innocence.

Pastor Nurliev, who leads Light to the World Church in Mary, was arrested on 27 August on charges of large-scale swindling under Article 228, Part 2 of the Criminal Code, which carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment and confiscation of property. Three people wrote statements to the police that he had extracted from them 1,400 Manats (3,079 Norwegian Kroner, 387 Euros or 491 US Dollars). His wife and other church members insist the allegations are false and were obtained from the three under police pressure (see F18News 30 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481).

But vigorously defending the investigation is Razmurad Durdiev, prosecutor of Mary. "No-one is being pressured to write statements," he insisted to Forum 18 from Mary on 6 September. "All is being done in accordance with the law." Asked why prosecutors believe Pastor Nurliev has unlawfully extracted 1,400 Manats from the three, he responded: "Ask him where he got the money from." He declined to answer any other questions and put the phone down.

Forum 18 was unable to reach investigator Durdimurad Gazakov, who is leading the case at the Mary town police. The person who answered the phone on 6 September immediately hung up. The telephone went answered each time Forum 18 called subsequently.

Forum 18 was also unable to reach Shohrat Ovezmuradov, head of Mary town police.

OSCE Centre "closely following" case

In the wake of her husband's arrest, Nurlieva took her case to the OSCE Centre in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] on 1 September. She told Forum 18 that she had requested them to send observers to any future trial.

The OSCE Centre told Forum 18 on 7 September that it is "closely following the developments regarding the case of Pastor Nurliev". However, it cited confidentiality over any legal advice it might have offered in the case.

Health concerns

Nurlieva said that she has been denied access to her husband since his 27 August arrest. She said that as far as she knows, he is still being held in a cell designed for 12 which holds 47 prisoners. The cell is small with just one window. "Many of the prisoners smoke and the atmosphere is said to be terrible," she told Forum 18. "My husband is a non-smoker and he will be affected terribly. He has

already asked to be moved, but in vain."

Nurlieva added that her husband – who is 45 years old and a grandfather of two – is under treatment for diabetes. He goes to the hospital once a month for treatment and she fears that without this regular treatment his health might suffer.

Long-planned case?

Nurliev has been barred from leaving Turkmenistan since 2007, while his church's registration application has languished since the same year (see F18News 30 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481).

Forum 18 has learned that police began questioning church members in early 2010, trying to pressure them to write accusatory statements against Pastor Nurliev which could form the basis of a prosecution case. One church member was told she would be imprisoned if she did not comply. However, all refused, despite the threats.

Eventually, the police found three people who wrote accusations against Pastor Nurliev. Two were women who had attended several church meetings, who are said by church members to have written the statements under police pressure and now bitterly regret them. The other accuser – a man – is unknown to church members.

Since Pastor Nurliev's arrest, three church members have been summoned and pressured – at times crudely – to sign similar statements. However, they all refused.

"They have been working on this case for some months," Nurlieva told Forum 18. "They are singling him out because he is an ethnic Turkmen Christian leader."

Forum 18 notes that officials often pressure ethnic Turkmens who belong to non-Muslim faiths to abandon their religion and accuse them of being traitors to their nation.

Nurlieva told Forum 18 that as of 9 September, police had not returned her husband's internal passport, money, certificate of preaching and other items they had taken on his arrest. "All they gave back were the keys to our flat."

Protestants elsewhere in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 that they fear similar moves might follow against them. "Which of us will be next?!" a Protestant from a church in another town – who knows Pastor Nurliev – asked Forum 18.

Tight controls

All religious communities in Turkmenistan are under tight government control. Islam has been subordinated to the state, which names all its senior officials, while other faiths remain under close surveillance. Religious communities are not able to acquire, open and maintain places of worship freely. Nor are they able freely to offer religious education, nor publish or import religious books and other materials. They are not free to invite foreigners to visit for religious purposes.

Five Jehovah's Witnesses are serving prison terms for refusing compulsory military service, with a further three serving suspended sentences. Several imams have been imprisoned in 2010, one of whom died in detention. It remains unclear why these imams were arrested (see F18News 30 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1481).

Will Muslims from Turkmenistan reach Mecca?

It remains unclear whether the Turkmen authorities will allow any local Muslims to take part in this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which begins in November. The Saudi authorities are believed to offer Turkmenistan 5,000 places annually. However, the Turkmen authorities have allowed only one plane-load of pilgrims to travel in a government-controlled group. Between 2005 and 2008, this was 188 people per year, which included pilgrims and government minders to supervise them. However, in 2009 the government refused to allow any Muslims to go on the haj, citing health concerns over the H1N1 virus (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

Forum 18 was unable to reach any officials at the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad to find out if any Muslims will be able to travel on the haj. The telephones went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 6 and 9 September, while 10 September is a public holiday to mark the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. (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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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