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TURKMENISTAN: Baptists threatened as harsh new law used to bite

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In the first instance known to Forum 18 News Service of the use against believers of Turkmenistan's harsh new religion law, which came into force in November, police raided a Baptist Sunday service and took everyone present, including children, to a police station. Forum 18 has learnt that everyone present was accused of breaking the new religion law by worshipping without state registration, warned they would be fined 10 times the minimum wage for the first two such cases in a year, and then face criminal charges. One woman was threatened that her children would be taken from her and then put in a children's home. Turkmenistan only allows Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities to have state registration.

In the first known instance of the use against believers of Turkmenistan's harsh new religion law that came into force in November, police who raided a Baptist Sunday service on 30 November warned church members that they would face severe punishments if they continue to worship without state registration. The raid on the church in Balkanabad (formerly Nebitdag) in the west of the country was led by Major Aman Annayev, the head of the town's sixth police department (responsible for combating organised crime and terrorism). Reached by telephone at his office in Balkanabad on 8 December, Major Annayev categorically refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 News Service.

In the wake of the raid, police took all those present at the service, including children, to the police station, the Baptists reported. They were accused of breaking the new religion law and warned that they would be fined 10 times the minimum wage under the code of administrative offences for the first two cases of breaking the law in the course of a year. However, subsequently they would face charges under the criminal code.

One of the Baptist women was threatened that her four children would be taken from her and placed in a children's home.

The authorities have already handed down steadily-increasing fines on the Balkanabad Baptists this year for continuing to hold unregistered prayer meetings (see F18News 14 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=163).

The Balkanabad Baptists belong to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists). The Council of Churches split from other Baptists in 1961, when state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since.

The new religion law, which came into force on 10 November, outlaws all unregistered religious activity, while a criminal code amendment prescribes penalties for breaking the law of up to a year of "corrective labour". Turkmenistan thus joined Uzbekistan and Belarus in defying the international human rights agreements they have signed, by banning unregistered religious activity (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180).

As the authorities allow only Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities to register, this is a considerable further move in repressing minority faiths. Even before the new law came into force, Forum 18 knows of religious believers having been fined, detained, beaten, threatened, sacked from their jobs, had their homes confiscated, banished to remote parts of the country or deported for unregistered religious activity.

Forum 18 has tried to establish to what extent the situation of the Balkanabad Baptists has deteriorated since the new law on religion was introduced. However, these efforts proved fruitless. As Major Annayev refused to discuss the raid, Forum 18 tried to clarify the situation at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad. However, this proved even less successful. Hardly had Forum 18 explained who was calling than officials immediately put the phone down.

The human rights officer at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe office in Ashgabad, Marie-Jose van Rie, said it was too early to say that the situation of religious minorities had worsened since the adoption of the new law. "The fact is the police raids on unregistered communities were happening before the new law was adopted," she told Forum 18 on 8 December. "But I think that in future, under the new law, the situation of religious minorities will become even worse."

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151).

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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