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TURKMENISTAN: Baptist freed after international pressure

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

Baptist Geldy Khudaikuliev was freed on 20 December from the secret police headquarters in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabad, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sources who did not wish to be named have told Forum 18 that he has now returned to his family and is very grateful to everyone who helped to secure his release, which they attribute to Forum 18's coverage of his case. However, as unregistered religious activity is seen as criminal activity by the Turkmen authorities, the situation of Baptists and of other religious communities continues to cause international concern.

After six days' detention at the secret police headquarters in the capital Ashgabad, Baptist Geldy Khudaikuliev was freed in the afternoon of 20 December, Protestant sources who did not want to be identified told Forum 18 News Service. "The good news is that Geldy is free, but we don't know how he was treated during his six-day detention," they declared. "Geldy thanked all those around the world who supported him and helped to secure his release," the sources added, attributing the release to Forum 18's coverage of his case. Khudaikuliev returned to his family.

Khudaikuliev leads a small Baptist community in the town of Geok-Tepe, 50 kilometres (30 miles) west of Ashgabad. Like all non-Sunni Muslim and all non-Russian Orthodox communities it does not have state registration and the government treats all its activity as illegal. He had travelled to Ashgabad to collect money that had been transferred to him from the office of Western Union. It remains unclear whether he withdrew the money or not, although Western Union apparently told those who had sent the money that it had been withdrawn on 13 December.

After Khudaikuliev's 15 December detention, for several days his family did not know what had happened to him. The family was later told that he was being held at the main headquarters of the National Security Ministry in Ashgabad, though no-one was allowed access to him (see F18News 19 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=218).

Baptists, like all other religious communities apart from Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox, are denied state registration by the Turkmen authorities. This means that all their religious activity are regarded as criminal offences under a harsh new religion law introduced in November 2003. The definition of unregistered religious activity as criminal activity defies the international human rights agreements Turkmenistan has signed (see F18News 11 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180), and can have very serious consequences for religious believers (see F18News 9 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=208).

The new religion law is the harshest in formerly Soviet states. Even before it came in Forum 18 knew of cases of places of worship being demolished by the authorities, and of religious believers being punished for unregistered religious activity by being fined, detained, beaten, threatened, sacked from their jobs, having their homes confiscated, being banished to remote parts of the country or being deported.

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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