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TURKMENISTAN: State interference with Islamic religious life in the north east

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The Turkmen government has been replacing ethnic Uzbek imam-hatybs (mosque leaders) with ethnic Turkmen, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The authorities are also forcing imam-hatybs to place the Turkmen flag above mosque entrances, to begin every sermon by praising "Turkmenbashi", "Father of the Turkmen", as President Saparmurat Niyazov insists on being called. Also, a copy of Niyazov's book, the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), must be placed at the entrance to every mosque and Muslims must touch it as if it were a sacred object. Similar instructions have reportedly been given to other Sunni Muslim mosques and Russian Orthodox Churches. These are the only two confessions allowed some limited freedom to operate in Turkmenistan.

In the past year, the Turkmen government has replaced ethnic Uzbek imam-hatybs with ethnic Turkmen in all the main mosques in the Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] region of north-eastern Turkmenistan, even though ethnic Uzbeks make up more than half the local population. Ethnic Uzbek imam-hatybs have been sacked from their jobs in all three active mosques in the town of Dashoguz, although the town's population is three-quarters ethnic Uzbek, Forum 18 learnt in the town on 28 February. Among those who have lost their jobs is imam Dustlik Seidabdulla, brother of Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah who was himself sacked by President Saparmurat Niyazov as chief mufti of Turkmenistan in January 2003.

In Kunya-Urgench [Köneürgenç] district (60 kilometres [37 miles] north of Dashoguz) Uzbek imam-hatybs have been sacked as leaders of mosques on ancient sites and at the cemeteries Ashig-Aidyn, Ibrahim-adam and "the cemetery of 3,360 saints", which are revered by Muslims. The "Turkmenicisation" of the mosques is far from being the sole example of state interference in the lives of believers. The authorities have appropriated a third of the land owned by the Shalikyar mosque in Dashoguz and have placed a drugs dispensary there. The authorities are forcing imam-hatybs to place the Turkmen flag above mosque entrances. Every sermon delivered by imam-hatybs has to begin with a eulogy to "Turkmenbashi", "Father of the Turkmen", as President Saparmurat Niyazov insists on being called. A copy of Niyazov's book Ruhnama (Book of the Soul) is placed prominently at the entrance to every mosque and believers have to touch it as if it were a sacred object. Similar instructions have reportedly been given to other Sunni Muslim mosques and Russian Orthodox Churches. These are the only two legal confessions in Turkmenistan.

Muslim believers from the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan, which borders Turkmenistan, are also suffering from the actions of the Turkmen authorities. Residents in the districts of Uzbekistan that border Turkmenistan have to pay 6 US Dollars (equivalent to 43 Norwegian Kroner, 5 Euros, or 6,080 Uzbek Soms) for a Turkmen visa at the border. (Residents of districts of Uzbekistan that do not border with Turkmenistan have to obtain a Turkmen visa at the Turkmen embassy in Tashkent). Given that the average monthly wage in Khorezm region is less than 30 US Dollars (equivalent to less than 213 Norwegian Kroner, 25 Euros, or 30,400 Uzbek Soms), this is a large sum of money for local residents. Moreover, the graves of relatives of the Khorezm Uzbeks are often situated on Turkmen land. According to Muslim tradition, the whole family has to visit the graves of relatives. Given that Uzbek families have several children, a head of family has to hand over between 30 and 40 US Dollars to cross the border with the members of his household. This sum is so large that about two years ago a crowd of Uzbeks tried to use force to break through the border to visit the graves of their relatives.

The new visa regime also causes problems for people burying relatives and making religious pilgrimages. For example, the Karakapy bobo cemetery that serves the village of Yangiabad (in north western Uzbekistan, 60 kilometres (37 miles) from the regional centre, Urgench [Urganch]) is on Turkmen territory, but since the introduction of the visa regime local residents prefer to bury their compatriots on Uzbek territory. There are also many mazars (graves of holy men) and ancient mosques on Turkmen land that are revered by local Muslims. For example, local belief holds that three pilgrimages to the "cemetery of 3,360 saints" in the town of Kunya-Urgench are equal to one pilgrimage to Mecca.

Dashoguz region, in Turkmenistan, and Khorezm region, in Uzbekistan, constitute together a single ethnic region known as Khorezm which is now divided by a state border. The territory of this region is associated with the 3,000-year-old history of the Khorezm civilisation which traces its roots to the culture of Mesopotamia and Ancient China, and the States of the Great Kush. When Islam became established in the region, the Khorezmshah state existed here, which became a world power for a short period (between the 12th and 13th centuries) and also after the collapse of the Timur empire of the Khiva Khanate which occurred before

Russia colonised the region. Until 1598 the capital of Khorezmshah and of the Khiva Khanate was the city of Kunya-Urgench, which is situated in today's Turkmenistan.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and 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>

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY