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TURKMENISTAN: "Only two faiths are allowed, Islam and Orthodoxy" says deputy police chief

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

Abadan's deputy police chief has told Baptist Svetlana Gurkina that "in Turkmenistan only two faiths are allowed, Islam and Orthodoxy, while the rest are banned", local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. She was also subjected to crude remarks and threats to imprison her and confiscate her flat, if she continues to meet her fellow-Christians. Although criminal penalties for unregistered religious activity were formally lifted in May, unregistered Baptist communities have been hard-hit by the government's continued refusal to lift the ban on unregistered religious activity. Baptists in the capital Ashgabat have appealed to President Saparmurat Niyazov and government agencies to halt the ongoing persecution of Svetlana Gurkina.

Svetlana Gurkina, a Baptist from the town of Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], was threatened in mid-June with imprisonment and confiscation of her flat if she continues to meet her fellow-believers, local Baptists told Forum 18 News Service on 1 July. Gurkina belongs to a congregation of the Baptist Council of Churches who decline on principle to register in any of the former Soviet republics where they operate.

Although criminal penalties for unregistered religious activity were formally lifted in May (see F18News 24 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=326), these Baptist communities in Turkmenistan have been hard-hit by the government's continuing refusal to lift the ban on unregistered religious activity. Members of the Baptist congregation in Ashgabat have appealed to President Saparmurat Niyazov and various government agencies to halt the "persecution" of Gurkina.

Arriving at the town's police station on 15 June to recover her documents confiscated by the local police officer the previous evening, Gurkina reported that she was subjected to crude remarks and shouting from Abadan's deputy police chief D. Boliev. "Here in Turkmenistan, only two faiths are allowed, Islam and Orthodoxy, while the rest are banned!" he told her.

She said the "conversation" was then joined by another officer, who declared: "From now on you'll be under our control and your flat will be under surveillance. Wherever you go and whoever comes to visit you, we will know about it. Watch out: you face fines and then we will lock you up." When Gurkina informed the officer of President Niyazov's decree abolishing criminal penalties for religious activity "he went quiet".

Gurkina refused the officers' demands that she write a statement, insisting she was not guilty of anything. She said the local police officer then warned her: "If we observe that someone comes to visit you we will take your documents to the flat, hand them to the hyakimlik [local administration] and they will take away your flat." She said he tried to frighten her by saying she would be sentenced to ten days in prison. Warned that she would remain under surveillance, Gurkina was ordered to return to the police that evening, when she was finally handed back her documents.

Gurkina began to have problems because of her faith at the beginning of the year. On 13 February she was summoned by the secret police chief for Abadan. "They banned me from meeting with my friends in faith and even from travelling to Ashgabat, threatening to punish me and even to lock me up in prison," Gurkina reported.

Forum 18 has been unable to verify Gurkina's account independently, but reports from the Baptist Council of Churches have a long track-record of reliability.

Congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches have faced periodic harassment in recent years. Dozens of citizens of other former Soviet republics active in local congregations have been expelled from Turkmenistan, while individual Baptists have been fined, threatened, beaten, imprisoned and sacked from their jobs. Although such harassment appears to have lessened in recent months as the government tries to improve its image, intermittent harassment of Baptist Council of Churches congregations has continued.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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