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TURKMENISTAN: More pressure against Islamic religious practise

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Turkmenistan appears to be increasing pressure against Islam religious practise, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A human rights activist has told Forum 18 of increased moves against practising male Muslims visiting mosques in northern Turkmenistan, including two arrests. The MSS secret police officers have made imams hang a list of mosque-goers above the doors to their mosques, and now only those whose names are on the list are allowed to visit that mosque. Turkmenistan's deputy mufti, Atash Zamedov, refused to answer Forum 18's questions about lists of names hung over mosque entrances. Also, after the reduction of student numbers and dismissal of foreign Turkish lecturers at the Muslim theological faculty in Ashgabad, Forum 18 has learnt that all local Turkmen teachers and technical staff as well have been dismissed and replaced with new appointees.

The Turkmen authorities are conducting a campaign against Islam religious practise, under the pretext of combating "Wahhabism," a term widely and mostly incorrectly used in Central Asia to denote Muslims who operate independently of the authorities. Khaitbai Yakubov, a human rights activist from Khiva in Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan (which borders Turkmenistan's northern Dashoguz region, where there is a concentration of ethnic Uzbeks), told Forum 18 of increased moves against Muslims in Dashoguz [Dashowuz] under the guise of cracking down on "Wahhabis", including two arrests. This has also been noted by the exiled Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF), which has reported increased monitoring since August by the State Security Ministry (MSS) secret police of young men who regularly visit mosques in the central Ahal region.

Citing sources in Dashoguz, Yakubov reported that since the summer national security officers have been searching for Muslims who perform religious rituals "in a way that diverges from Turkmen custom." He named the two men arrested as part of the campaign as Muhamad Nurmukhamedov and Yager Kurbanov, both residents of the town. "They have been accused of Wahhabism", he noted. In July 2005, President Niyazov stated that "we have one religion and unique traditions and customs, and there is no need for people to look beyond these. Otherwise," he continued, "there will be self-styled mullahs, each one of whom will interpret religious rituals in his own way, which could in the end lead to feuds."

Yakubov told Forum 18 on 20 October that MSS secret police officers have also made all imams hang a list of mosque-goers above the doors to their mosques, and now only those whose names are on the list are allowed to visit that mosque (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614).

Turkmenistan's deputy mufti Atash Zamedov downplayed the government's moves against Muslims. "It is true that there has been a campaign against Wahhabism in the country, but that was one or two years ago," he told Forum 18 on 20 October. "Now, there are no Wahhabis among the imams or mosque-goers." Asked by Forum 18 whether lists of believers were hung over mosque entrances, Zamedov refused to answer.

According to the THF, the MSS secret police of one district of Ahal region is currently monitoring the rising number of young people who regularly visit the mosque five times a day to perform namaz (prayers). Since August, the MSS has systematically called in for questioning parents of young practising Muslims.

The THF reported that one set of such parents, who prefer to remain anonymous, were called in by the district MSS secret police for questioning about the religious practices of their son, who is currently performing national service in the army. The young man practises Islam and is trying to observe the rituals regularly, but this has prompted the authorities to accuse him of undermining the authority of the Turkmen soldier and of having elements of Wahhabism in his beliefs. When the parents argued that their son was not doing anything illegal, secret police officers told them to get a statement from their son renouncing his beliefs. Their son responded to his parents' request: "I don't intend to stop performing namaz, and there is no Wahhabism in my beliefs."

Forum 18 was unable to find out from the government's Gengeshi (Council) for religious affairs why there has been a new crackdown on mosques. The person who answered the telephone at its offices in the capital Ashgabad on 20 October failed to identify himself, and hung up as soon as he realised he was talking to a journalist. No-one at the MSS secret police was prepared to talk to Forum 18 either.

While all religious communities in Turkmenistan face strong government control (see F18News 18 October 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672), Islam is particularly tightly regulated, with all imams named by the state. Imams are forced to place copies of the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul) – a two-volume work alleged to have been written by President Saparmurat Niyazov – in a place of honour in each mosque and to quote from it during sermons.

Deputy mufti Zamedov defended the presence of the Ruhnama in every mosque and the requirement that imams quote from it in their sermons. "This book sheds light on the history and culture of Turkmen," he claimed to Forum 18. "It tells the story of Islam. For that reason imams quote from it during their sermons."

In the wake of President Niyazov's announcement in July that student numbers at the Muslim theological faculty in Ashgabad were to be reduced and that all foreign teachers, who were Turkish, were to be dismissed, Forum 18 has learned that all the local Turkmen teachers and technical staff as well have been dismissed and replaced with new appointees. The Turkish teachers have all returned to their home country, Forum 18 was told by the new secretary at the theological faculty on 20 October (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614).

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

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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