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TURKMENISTAN: Chief mufti joins crackdown on Protestants

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Amid a new crackdown on Protestant churches across Turkmenistan, five members of a church in Abadan have been warned not to meet together. Church members told Forum 18 News Service they were subjected to hours of questioning at the police station and town administration in the wake of a 31 May raid on the flat of two church members. Officials threatened to confiscate the flat. The crackdown has seen at least six other Protestant churches raided during services since the beginning of May. Forum 18 has learnt that chief mufti Kakageldy Vepaev took part in at least four of the raids. OSCE officials in the capital Ashgabat refused to comment on the raids or on Turkmenistan's violation of religious freedom.

As part of a new crackdown on Protestant churches across Turkmenistan, five members of a non-denominational Protestant church in the town of Abadan (formerly Bezmein) near the capital Ashgabat have been warned not to meet together again. Church members told Forum 18 News Service that the warnings came as they were subjected to hours of questioning at the local police station and the town hyakimlik (administration) in the wake of a raid on 31 May on the flat of church members Nuri Berdiev and his wife Nabat Niyazova.

Officials in Abadan were reluctant to talk about the raid and the questioning of the Protestants. The deputy head of the town police, Jarail Safaraliev, confirmed to Forum 18 on 3 June that the raid took place and that the Protestants were being questioned, but said he did not have "detailed information". He suggested that Forum 18 contact the head of the town police, Gigeldi Annamukhamedov, the KNB (National Security Committee) or the hyakim (head of administration).

Only one official at the hyakimlik was prepared to answer Forum 18's questions. "Write what you like," an aide to the hyakim - who refused to give his name - told Forum 18 from the town on 3 June. "I'm in the picture about the case and everything is being done in accordance with the law." He said a commission of the hyakimlik was that day "reviewing the legality of the Protestants' activity", but insisted that no plans to confiscate the flat were being discussed.

Just before the 31 May raid, the wife of the neighbouring young Muslim mullah came to the door to ask if they were Jehovah's Witnesses. Berdiev said they were not and explained that they were Christians. "If I want my daughters to come to your meeting, will you let them?" the mullah's wife asked. "Everybody is welcome," Berdiev responded. She said goodbye, and minutes later the flat was raided. The raid was led by Sapar (second name unknown), an official of the KNB's 6th department which controls religious activity. He was accompanied by two police officers.

During the raid about fifteen Christian books – including Bibles - were confiscated. All those present in the flat (except for the children) were forced to go to the local police station. The five – not only Berdiev and Niyazova but also Guzelya Syraeva, Lyudmila Galkina and Akgulya Niyazova – were pressured to write "explanatory statements" with promises not to meet again. All except Berdiev were then released.

Sapar tried to threaten Berdiev, promising to instruct the local administration and the police to confiscate the family's flat. (Unlike in most towns in Turkmenistan, their flat is state-owned.) Sapar ordered him to stop holding Christian meetings at this flat for any reason "forever", and gave "instructions" to Abadan's police chief to "sort out the matter with Nuri and stop them meeting again". Berdiev was eventually freed.

All five were told to report to the police station again on 2 June for "disciplinary work". On 2 June the five were held from 11 am until 9 pm at night. Church members told Forum 18 that none of them were beaten, but while they were being held the police brought in other people they had detained and beat them in front of them. One detained man was beaten hard on the back of the neck. "His eyes watered and he could not talk after that," one church member reported. "It was shocking. Maybe they did this to scare the young ladies in our group."

The five were ordered to come to the hyakimlik at 8 am on 3 June. There they were subjected to questioning by an administrative commission.

The raid on the Abadan church came amid mounting pressure on Protestant congregations in Turkmenistan, none of which have

been allowed to register with the government. The government treats all Protestant activity as illegal.

On 11 May two unregistered Baptist Sunday morning services were broken up simultaneously in the cities of Balkanabad and Turkmenbashi (see F18News 23 May 2003). Forum 18 has learnt from sources in Ashgabad that at least four different Protestant congregations in the city had worship services raided in May. Leaders of these congregations, contacted by Forum 18, declined to give details of the raids, perhaps fearing that publicity could make their situation worse. "It was just a regular event," one told Forum 18. "There has been no follow-up."

In a new development, the country's chief mufti, Kakageldy Vepaev, is reported to have personally taken part in the raids on churches in Ashgabad and in follow-up meetings at hyakimliks when church members were questioned and threatened. Vepaev also serves as a deputy chairman of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs. Forum 18 tried to reach Vepaev by telephone on 3 June to ask why he was involved in raiding Protestant churches, but an official at the Gengeshi said he was away on a work trip.

In a separate incident, two women who briefly attended Jehovah's Witness meetings several years ago but have not had contact with them since then were sacked from their jobs in May. Sources who asked not to be identified and who asked for the women's names and location not to be identified have told Forum 18 that the two were sacked because of their previous attendance at Jehovah's Witness meetings. "They were amazed as this was something that happened years ago," the source declared. "This makes me believe that the authorities keep a watch list of religious people."

Despite the repression of religious minorities in Turkmenistan, officials of the Ashgabad centre of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) adamantly refused to comment on the country's failure to abide by its international commitments on religious freedom.

Dieter Matthei, political officer who is named on the OSCE website as the centre's press contact, told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 3 June that he did not have "enough reliable information" about the crackdown on Protestants over the past month. He declined absolutely to give any comment about the general religious freedom situation, referring all enquiries to the OSCE spokesperson in Vienna. The centre's human dimension officer likewise declined to make any on-the-record comment about the recent crackdown or about the general religious freedom situation.

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