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Torture and jail for one 4 year and 14 short-term prisoners of conscience

Forum 18 (21.05.2015) - Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov has been tortured and given a four-year prison term on 19 May in Turkmenistan's eastern city of Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat, formerly Charjew], Forum 18 News Service has been told. Prisoner of conscience Hemdemov was punished on criminal charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses insisted to Forum 18 he is innocent of. His real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship with his fellow believers.

Along with Hemdemov and many of the latest 2015 short-term prisoners of conscience, Hemdemov's son Serdar was also jailed for 15 days as a prisoner of conscience and tortured (see below).

The imprisonment of Turkmenistan's latest prisoner of conscience came after many arrests in Turkmenabad since February of Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Many detainees were beaten and subsequently sentenced to 15 day terms of imprisonment, some of them more than once. "Only one of the victims has been provided with a court decision, which found him guilty under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 345 ("Minor hooliganism")", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 21 May.

Raids and punishments aimed at most important commemoration?

A number of those imprisoned for 15 days were in prison on 3 April, when Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide mark their most important annual observance, the Memorial of Christ's Death. Similar raids apparently timed to coincide with this important commemoration in the past against the community in Turkmenabad and other places, for example in 2007.

Raids and punishments targeted against Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have continued. In March 2014, Turkmenabad Jehovah's Witnesses faced raids which led to 10 15-day jail terms and two fines. Raids on this community were repeated in June.

Criminal charges, violence, four-year jail sentence

Criminal charges were brought against prisoner of conscience Hemdemov after a raid on his Turkmenabad home during a meeting for worship on 14 March (see below). Charges were lodged against him under Criminal Code Article 177, Part 2 ("Inciting social, ethnic or religious hatred using mass media"). These charges carry a maximum prison term of four years.

Police confiscated Hemdemov's personal possessions, including his car, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Since his detention, officers have repeatedly interrogated and beaten Hemdemov.

Jehovah's Witnesses identified a Turkmenabad-based Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officer Mekan Veliyev as one of those who participated in the beatings of Hemdemov. He also participated in the torture of at least six local Jehovah's Witnesses since the raids and detentions began in February 2015.

It is suspected by local Jehovah's Witnesses that Mekan Veliyev may not be the real name of this MSS officer. Forum 18 was unable to reach Veliyev to find out if and why he was involved in beating people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Following his arrest, prisoner of conscience Hemdemov was placed in pre-trial detention. "Despite their best efforts, Hemdemov's relatives were unable to obtain any information about the charges against him, nor were they permitted to provide him with food or other necessary supplies," Jehovah's Witnesses stated.

On 19 May, Hemdemov was sentenced by Judge Gochmurad Charyev at Lebap Regional Court to the maximum four years' imprisonment under Article 177, Part 2. The Judge also ruled that Hemdemov's property should be confiscated, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The telephones of Turkmenabad Police were not answered each time Forum 18 called on 21 May. Officials who answered the phones of the Regional and City Religious Affairs Departments in Turkmenabad declined to discuss anything with Forum 18. Those answering the telephones at the Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] said the numbers did not relate to the Gengesh.

Torture frequently used by authorities

Torture and violence, including violence apparently ordered by the government, is frequently used by the authorities. This includes against the relatives and friends of 15 then-current and former conscientious objector prisoners who appealed to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee between September 2012 and August 2013 against their imprisonment and maltreatment. The prisoners of conscience were in Seydi Labour Camp regularly subjected to spells in the punishment cell and some were brutally beaten. After the UN sought information from the government about the complaints, the home of a prisoner was raided in January 2013 and individuals were beaten, threatened with rape and fined.

In February 2015 Muslim prisoners convicted of alleged "Wahhabism" were subjected in the Seydi Labour Camp to brutal beatings, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. One man suffered a broken hand, while another suffered a broken rib and damage to his lung.

In 2011 the UN Committee against Torture found that, in Turkmenistan "persons deprived of their liberty are tortured, ill-treated and threatened by public officers, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, to extract confessions and as an additional punishment after the confession".

First February raid, violence, 3 short-term prisoners of conscience

The most recent series of raids on Turkmenabad's Jehovah's Witnesses began on 6 February, when police or the MSS secret police arrested Viktor Yarygin, Rustam Nazarov, Charygeldy Jumaev and Jamilya Adylova. Three of them – Nazarov, Jumaev and Adylova - were beaten by MSS secret police officer Veliyev, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Jumaev was beaten so severely that he lost consciousness three times during the beating."

All four were brought before Judge Gulnaz Jumaniyazova at Turkmenabad City Court on 6 February. She found all four guilty under Administrative Code Article 345 ("Minor hooliganism"), she told Forum 18. Nazarov, Jumaev and Adylova were given sentences of 15 days' imprisonment, the maximum term of imprisonment under Article 345. "Yarygin is a pensioner, so I fined him 100 Manats [about 216 Norwegian Kroner, 26 Euros, or 29 US Dollars]." This is about half the average monthly salary for collective farm workers.

Adylova and Jumaev were each sentenced to three separate terms of 15 days' imprisonment. The first imprisonment was from 6 to 21 February, the second from 16 to 31 March, and the third from 31 March to 15 April.

Jailed for asking for a written copy of court decision

On 2 April, Nazarov went to the trial court to receive a copy of the written decision. However, once at the court, Judge Jumaniyazova sentenced him to a second term of 15 days' imprisonment. She claimed to Forum 18 that Nazarov had shouted in the court, insulting court officials and threatening to kill all of them. "He was shouting in the corridor," she insisted. "I heard it, everyone here heard it." Police were called, he was arrested and she sentenced him again under Article 345.

However, Jehovah's Witnesses denied on 21 May that Nazarov insulted or shouted in the court. Contrary to Judge Jumaniyazova's claims, they state that she was irritated that Nazarov was so persistent in asking for a copy of the court decision. The Judge then decided to illegally punish him with another 15-day jail term.

Judge Jumaniyazova totally denied that the punishments, including the jailing of prisoner of conscience Nazarov, were related to the four individuals' exercise of their freedom of religion or belief. "It was not because of their religion," she claimed. "They argued with police officers and violated social order."

The four filed formal complaints over their treatment with the Presidential Administration and the General Prosecutor's Office in Ashgabad.

Second February and March raid, 8 short-term prisoners of conscience, 30 fines

On 20 February, Turkmenabad Police conducted what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as an "illegal" search of the home of Zeynep Husaynova and her son Tohtabay Husaynov.

Officers confiscated all personal religious literature they could find. The police threatened to prosecute Husaynova under the Administrative Code for possessing "illegal" religious literature and sentence her to 15 days' imprisonment.

The third and most serious raid came on 14 March. Turkmenabad Police raided the Hemdemov family home, where 38 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for worship. The police confiscated all the religious literature they could find and took everyone to the police station. All were detained until the early morning hours.

All 38 Jehovah's Witnesses were brought before Judge Gurdov at Serdarabad District Court, where they were convicted under the Administrative Code in two trials, Judge Jumaniyazova told Forum 18. Eight were sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment each. A further 30 were fined, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Religious literature is under tight state censorship. The Gengesh must approve any religious literature before it is used. Gengesh officials stamp copies of books they have approved. Literature without such a stamp is liable to confiscation and individuals can be subject to punishment.

"Particularly brutal treatment", torture by electrocution threat

Prisoner of conscience Emirjan Jumanazarov was "singled out for particularly brutal treatment", Jehovah's Witnesses complain. On 16 March he was convicted under the Administrative Code for alleged "disorderly conduct" (apparently under Article 345) and sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment.

"While in prison, Jumanazarov was beaten, kicked and subjected to obscene insults by law enforcement officials, including MSS officer Mekan Veliyev," fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Jumanazarov was also threatened with torture by electrocution." Under threat of torture, officers forced him to sign a statement claiming that he had been detained for an identification check because he had "aimlessly strolled about the streets".

On 1 April, Jumanazarov was again convicted and given 15 days' imprisonment for "disorderly conduct". It was claimed that while "preaching teachings of an unregistered religious organisation" he had "insulted" an officer who had stopped him.

Jehovah's Witnesses also expressed concern over the treatment of another of those imprisoned, 19-year-old Serdar Hemdemov (son of the homeowner Bahram Hemdemov). He was beaten and repeatedly interrogated by the police, including by MSS secret police officer Veliyev and a Muslim cleric.

On 16 March, he was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment under the Administrative Code. During the imprisonment he was interrogated three times. "Once he was kicked by the police and beaten with plastic bottles filled with water," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

On 31 March, Serdar Hemdemov was convicted again under the Administrative Code for "disorderly conduct" and sentenced to a further 15 days' imprisonment. During the second imprisonment he was interrogated on three separate occasions. On 17 April, he was placed in isolation and severely beaten.

Three consecutive 15 day prison terms, with beatings

Turkmenabad Police also detained Jehovah's Witness Dovlet Kandymov on 18 March. He was subsequently sentenced to two successive sentences of 15 days' imprisonment under the Administrative Code. He should have been released at the end of his second sentence on 16 April. However, on 18 April he was sentenced to a third term of 15 days' imprisonment based on an allegation by police that they had received "a complaint from his wife".

While in jail, prisoner of conscience Kandymov was repeatedly beaten by MSS secret police officer Veliyev to force him to testify against prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov, Jehovah's Witness stated.

Two more short-term prisoners of conscience, beating

On the evening of 18 April, Turkmenabad Police detained Dovlet Byashimov when he was leaving his house. He was released on 26 April.

On 6 May, Police detained Konstantin Vlaskin while walking on the street. The police then accompanied him to his home where they beat him and his sister, Aleksandra. Officers confiscated his religious literature and computer. Vlaskin is still today (21 May) in detention.

Both Byashimov and Vlaskin are former prisoners of conscience. Vlaskin was held for 15 days in 2005 to punish him for his exercise of freedom of religion or belief and was also beaten then by police. Byashimov served 18 months' imprisonment from 2010 for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. He too was beaten in custody.

Official bullying of schoolchildren, teachers fired

The 2014-5 school year has seen increased public bullying and other actions against children who belong to religious communities the authorities do not like, sources told Forum 18.

In September 2014, at the start of the school year, at least some Ashgabad schools required parents and children to sign statements that the children would not attend religious organisations, several Ashgabad parents told Forum 18. "As this contradicts the law, we refused to sign," one parent told Forum 18. "We didn't suffer for not signing. It was all done to create tension for us."

In one village secondary school, photos of children of members of a local Protestant church were hung on the school's bulletin board, the Christian human rights charity Open Doors noted, without identifying the school or location. "Children of parent sectarians, so be aware and vigilant!" a caption to the photos warned. "All of the records of these children are placed in the school headteacher's office as if these children are especially dangerous due to their parents' religious beliefs," Open Doors added.

Such official bullying of children and their parents has also taken place in the past, using tactics such as hostile public meetings at which people are told to ostracise Christians. Children have also been subjected to marks being lowered and ridicule by teachers in class.

Several Protestants who worked as school teachers were fired from their jobs in 2014, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They asked that the individuals and locations not be identified.

Protestants who held state jobs – the state is the largest employer in the country – have also been fired in the past for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Those fired have included teachers, airline cabin staff, and doctors.

Summer camp, youth conference banned

The Baptist church in Mary, east of Ashgabad, was ordered to cancel its summer camp for local children in 2014. Church members went to the head of the Regional Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, who is also the Regional Imam.

The state appoints all senior officials of the country's Muslim administration, like the Regional Imam. Such officials all have a second role as Gengesh officials tasked with restricting freedom of religion or belief. This means that the state-appointed leaders of one faith control the state-permitted activities of all other faiths, including whether their communities are allowed to exist.

The Imam demanded documentation of the proposed summer camp from the Baptist church. Church members handed over the documentation. A little while later, they received a telephone call from the Gengesh prohibiting them from holding the summer camp, Protestants told Forum 18.

Police raided the same church's summer camp in June 2013, and summer camps organised by other churches have also been raided.

Similarly, the Baptist Union was ordered to abandon a conference of young people from across the country, planned to be held in Ashgabat in February 2015, Protestants told Forum 18. "When the authorities learned that this youth conference was being planned, the church got a call from the Gengesh telling it not to go ahead," one Ashgabat Protestant told Forum 18.

Two amnestied prisoners, conscientious objector in hospital, beaten "Wahhabis"

Forum 18 News (18.02.2015) - Two religious prisoners were freed under amnesty from the general regime labour camp in Seydi in eastern Turkmenistan yesterday (17 February), their fellow believers told Forum 18 News Service. Released were Umid Gojaye, a 32-year-old Protestant imprisoned on charges of hooliganism, and 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Narkuliyev.

After his release, Gojaye boarded a train for the two-day journey via the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] to return to his wife and three young children in the northern city of Dashoguz, Protestants in Turkmenistan told Forum 18. Narkuliyev has a journey of just 75 kms (50 miles) to his home in Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] (formerly Charjew).

Gojaye and Narkuliyev were freed under a prisoner amnesty to mark Flag Day on 19 February. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov signed a decree initiating the amnesty on 16 February, the government website noted the same day.

"Narkuliyev's release means that there are no longer any Jehovah's Witnesses convicted and imprisoned in Turkmenistan as conscientious objectors," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 18 February. "This is the first time for many years and is obviously a very welcome development."

Six of the eight Jehovah's Witness prisoners freed under amnesty in October 2014 were conscientious objectors.

Meanwhile, five Muslim men imprisoned on charges of religious extremism, who arrived in Seydi strict regime labour camp in early February, were severely beaten on arrival. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if they – and a group of about ten Muslim men transferred from that labour camp to the high-security prison in Ovadan-Depe in December 2014 – are prisoners of conscience (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach the leadership of Seydi strict regime labour camp or the high-security prison in Ovadan-Depe as no telephone numbers for them are made public.

These developments come as police, state religious affairs officials and the courts continue to punish individuals and communities for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, with raids, threats and fines (see forthcoming F18News article).

Conscientious objector in military hospital

Soyunmurat Korov became the second known Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience (in addition to Narkuliyev) when he was arrested on 18 November 2014. He refused the compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience.

However, Korov was then transferred to the military hospital in Bekrewe on the western edge of Ashgabad as he was suffering from an apparent medical complaint. "Korov is being kept for medical observation against his will by order of the investigator and/or prosecutor," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "We are obviously still very concerned about him and hope that the prosecutor and/or investigator will now take steps to allow him to leave the hospital and return home."

It remains unclear if Korov will be allowed to return home or if he will face trial for refusing military service as so many other young male Jehovah's Witnesses have done over many years.

Freed prisoners

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Ruslan Narkuliyev was sentenced by a Turkmenabad court to two years' imprisonment in September 2014 under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. Soon after his sentencing, Narkuliyev was transferred to the general regime section of the Seydi Labour Camp in eastern Lebap Region.

Narkuliyev's fellow Jehovah's Witnesses had hoped he would be freed under amnesty in October 2014, together with the other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. However, Narkuliyev's name appears to have been left off the list and he was not.

Gojajev, the Protestant from Dashoguz, was also held in the same camp. Arrested in April 2012, he was serving a four year prison term imposed by a Dashoguz court in May 2012. His arrest followed an argument with neighbours, and local Protestants insist the criminal charges were brought disproportionately because of his religious beliefs.

"Wahhabi" prisoners beaten

In the beginning of February, five prisoners convicted of "Wahhabism" were brought into the strict-regime labour camp in Seydi. From 5 to 7 February, prison guards subjected them to brutal beatings, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. One man suffered a broken hand, while another suffered a broken rib and damage to his lung.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the five men were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief or for committing crimes. The term "Wahhabi" is widely used in Central Asia for any devout Muslim, regardless of whether they do or do not commit or espouse violence.

In 2011 the UN Committee against Torture found that, in Turkmenistan, "persons deprived of their liberty are tortured, ill-treated and threatened by public officers, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, to extract confessions and as an additional punishment after the confession".

Yet violence against prisoners in Turkmenistan continues widely, human rights defenders and exiled Turkmen journalists note. Following his release from labour camp in Bairamali in July 2014 and return to Russia, Stanislav Romashchenko (who had been imprisoned for attempted murder) recounted many cases when prison guards and riot police beat him and fellow prisoners, in a film by the exile Alternative Turkmenistan News.

Fifteen current and former conscientious objector prisoners lodged applications to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee between September 2012 and August 2013 protesting against their imprisonment and maltreatment. The complaints note that

especially in the Seydi Labour Camp, where most of the conscientious objector prisoners are held, they were regularly subjected to spells in the punishment cell and some were brutally beaten.

These complaints are still pending with the UN Human Rights Committee, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The family home in Dashoguz of the lead complainant in one Jehovah's Witness UN complaint was raided by police in January 2013, seven weeks after the UN had sought information from the Turkmen government about the circumstances of the complaint. Individuals were beaten, threatened with rape and fined.

"Wahhabi" prisoners transferred back to Ovadan-Depe

The Turkmen authorities have imprisoned many "Wahhabis" in recent years, many of whom are held in a closed section of the isolated top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe in the Karakum desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Again, Forum 18 has been unable to find out if these "Wahhabis" were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief or for committing crimes.

About 10 Muslim prisoners were transferred in December 2014 from the strict-regime labour camp in Seydi back to Ovadan-Depe prison, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. The men had already served at least six years' imprisonment (two three-year terms) in Ovadan-Depe until their transfer to Seydi in 2013.

As soon as they arrived in Seydi, they were sent to the punishment cells, where they were held for about a year and a half before their December 2014 transfer back to Ovadan-Depe. For some of the time they were all held together in one punishment cell, at other times the group was divided between two punishment cells.

The group's leader, Ashirali (last name unknown), who is from Ashgabad, was the first to be arrested, in 2008. Two of the others are named Begench and Attou or Ata (last names unknown). The names of the rest are unknown.

The group of Muslims – described as "Wahhabis" – were apparently punished after bullets were planted on them or for resisting an official. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if they are prisoners of conscience punished solely for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

About 120 men accused of being "Wahhabis" were being held in the seventh and eighth blocks at Ovadan-Depe in 2014, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 24 August 2014. Like political prisoners held in the desert prison, "Wahhabis" are banned from receiving parcels or visits from relatives, it added.
