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The right to change one's belief or religion
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TURKMENISTAN: Prisoner of conscience freed, but remains under restrictions

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev was freed from Ovadan-Depe Prison in Turkmenistan on 17 May, Forum 18 News Service has learned. However, he remains under restrictions, having to report to police up to three times a week. Nuryllaev was freed under amnesty, having been originally arrested in November 2011 and in January 2012 sentenced to four years imprisonment. Another Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Sunet Japbarov – a conscientious objector to compulsory military service - has been freed from labour camp at the end of his 18-month sentence. Their release leaves six known Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, five of them conscientious objectors and one - Aibek Salayev – sentenced like Nuryllayev on charges of "spreading pornography". There are also an unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience also jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Another conscientious objector, Ashgabat-based Juma Nazarov, was arrested on 10 May and faces criminal charges.

Six months after his arrest in Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Nuryllayev was freed from Ovadan-Depe Prison on 17 May under amnesty and returned to his home in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat], Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. However, he remains under restrictions, having to report to police up to three times a week. Another Jehovah's Witness prisoner Sunet Japbarov – a conscientious objector to compulsory military service - has been freed from labour camp at the end of his 18-month sentence. Their release leaves six confirmed prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Five of them are Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors and one - Aibek Salayev – was sentenced like Nuryllayev on charges of "spreading pornography" for being a Jehovah's Witness.

There are also an unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience also jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

"He remains very weak"

Nuryllayev's release came as part of the presidentially-decreed prisoner amnesty to mark the 18 May Constitution Day. More than 1,000 prisoners are said to have been freed. Nuryllayev appears to have been the only Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience among those released. Nuryllayev was not required to swear any oath before being freed.

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Nuryllaev was being held in the manual labour section of the isolated top-security prison of Ovadan-Depe in the Karakum Desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. "Volodya got thinner in prison, and remains very weak, and his state of health is still being checked," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "But he's gradually getting back to normal and has returned to work." Nuryllaev works as a building worker.

Each Sunday Nuryllaev has to report to Ashgabad's Azatlyk District Police Station, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. At least once, and often twice a week, he also has to report to the neighbourhood police officer Nazar Tashov. "All this is designed to prevent him from travelling anywhere," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

Six months in prison

Nuryllaev was arrested on 15 November 2011. On 18 January 2012 he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on charges of "spreading pornography". His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that "all this has been done because he is a Jehovah's Witness", insisting that he "is a highly moral and deeply devout person and has nothing to do with pornography". There has also been an unverified report that a Muslim may have been sentenced in 2011 on similar charges, for distributing religious discs.

Prisoners of conscience, imprisoned like Nuryllaev in a labour camp, have spoken of beatings and punishments of solitary confinement. "A member of the Special Police Force (OMON) entered my cell on two occasions and beat me on the head and neck with his baton," one recalled (see F18News 25 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1660).

On 12 April Jehovah's Witness Salayev was sentenced on the same charges as Nuryllaev to the same four year term of imprisonment. As with Nuryllaev, Jehovah's Witnesses insist that Salayev is also innocent and has also been jailed for his beliefs. He has been brutally beaten by the ordinary police and MSS secret police "in the stomach, on the kidneys and on the head. As a result his face swelled up and he could not eat", local Jehovah's Witnesses who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Salayev was sentenced by the same Judge at Dashoguz City Court, Akmurad Akmuradov, who on 1 May sentenced Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Navruz Nasyrlaev to the maximum two-year strict regime labour camp sentence for this "offence". Nasyrlaev was the second conscientious objector jailed in 2012 (see F18News 17 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1702).

It remains unknown if Salayev and Nasyrlaev have already been sent to labour camps to serve their sentences. Inspector Dovlet (last name unknown) of Dashoguz Pre-Trial Detention Centre, where both were being held, claimed to Forum 18 on 28 May he had not heard of either prisoner of conscience. He then put the phone down.

Turkmenistan's refusal to recognise the right to refuse military service, which is part of the internationally recognised right to freedom of religion or belief, breaks the country's international human rights commitments. The first conscientious objector sentenced in 2012 was Jehovah's Witness Zafar Abdullaev, who was given the maximum two-year prison term on 6 March (see F18News 18 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1691).

Five imprisoned conscientious objectors, another to follow?

Japbarov – who had been held together with other imprisoned

conscientious objectors at the Seydi general regime labour camp in eastern Turkmenistan – was freed on 14 May at the end of his sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

With Japbarov's release, the five imprisoned conscientious objectors are: Matkarim Aminov, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, December 2010; Dovran Matyakubov, 18 months, Dashoguz Court, December 2010; Mahmud Hudaybergenov, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, August 2011; Zafar Abdullaev, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, March 2012; and Navruz Nasyrlaev, 2 years, Dashoguz Court, May 2012. Japbarov, Aminov, and Matyakubov are expected to complete their sentences in June 2012.

The address of Seydi Labour Camp is:

Turkmenistan,
746222 Lebap vilayet,
Seydi,
uchr. LB-K/12

Another conscientious objector, Ashgabad-based Juma Nazarov, was arrested on 10 May. He too faces criminal trial (see F18News 17 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1702).

One other Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector, Akmurad Nurjanov, is serving a one-year suspended sentence imposed in February (see F18News 16 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1668). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728.

For a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Turkmenistan>.

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