

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKMENISTAN

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

Jehovah's Witnesses have never been officially registered in Turkmenistan, though they have filed for registration a number of times.

Detention and mistreatment of conscientious objectors

Turkmenistan offers no alternative civilian service program for those whose conscientiously-held beliefs preclude them from performing compulsory military service. As a consequence, these young men are incarcerated rather than given the opportunity to serve their country in a dignified manner that respects their conscience. Since the amnesty in 2005 under the previous regime, more than 20 Jehovah's Witnesses have been tried and sentenced in Turkmenistan. Some have been convicted twice.

<i>Jehovah's Witnesses confined due to their conscientious objection to military service</i>			
Name (Age)	Date imprisoned / Release date	Sentence	Location
Zafar ABDULLAYEV (24)	6 March 2012 / 6 March 2014	Two years, avoiding army service (second term)	Seydi labor colony
Mahmud HUDAYBERGENOV (21)	9 August 2011 / 9 August 2013	Two years, avoiding army service	Seydi labor colony
Navruz NASYRLAYEV (22)	1 May 2012 / 1 May 2014	Two years, avoiding army service (second detention)	Seydi labor colony
Juma NAZAROV (19)	23 July 2012 / December 2013	18 months, avoiding army service	Detention center, Yashlyk

Unjustly imprisoned:

Abdullayev, Hidaybergenov, Nasyrlayev, and Nazarov; Nuryllayev and Salayev



- On 8 April 2009, 22-year-old Zafar Abdullayev was summoned by the Dashoguz Military Commissariat with a call-up for military service. His conscientious objection brought a judgment of a 24-month suspended sentence. He had to report weekly to the police station, could not leave town without the permission of the police, had to be home by 11 p.m., and could not change his place of residence without the approval of the police.

Less than a year after he finished his sentence, on 6 March 2012, Abdullayev was again convicted of refusing military service and was given the maximum sentence of 24 months imprisonment. Immediately upon his arrival at the LBK-12 Seydi prison, Abdullayev was placed in quarantine for 10 days where prison guards beat him on his head and on the soles of his feet with batons. When he is eventually released, he will again face a call-up for military service and imprisonment as a conscientious objector.

- Beginning in the fall of 2008, Mahmud Hidaybergenov would receive a summons from the Military Commissariat for military service and then receive a suspension from service due to his anemia. Nevertheless, on 9 August 2011, Hidaybergenov was convicted and given the maximum sentence of 24 months imprisonment for refusing military service. As with Zafar Abdullayev, his eventual release will mean facing another summons for military service, prosecution, and detention as a conscientious objector.

- “Multiple jeopardy”—repeatedly facing the same criminal charges—has been particularly harsh for Navruz Nasyrlyayev. When he was summoned for military service in March 2009, he had already refused to serve on three previous occasions due to his conscientious beliefs. On 7 December 2009 the Dashoguz City Court sentenced Nasyrlyayev to two years of confinement in the Seydi labor colony. The decision was upheld on appeal and Nasyrlyayev was detained through 7 December 2011.

Throughout his confinement, Nasyrlyayev and three other Witnesses (since released) were beaten by the security forces. Nasyrlyayev also served a one-month punishment on the fabricated violation of possessing a knife, “found” shortly after it was planted in his bed. Apparently, this was intended to exclude him from an amnesty in May 2010.

Soon after his release, Nasyrlyayev faced the same charges and on 1 May 2012 was sentenced to two years of imprisonment in a *strict regime* colony as a repeat offender. Appeals submitted to the Supreme Court have been in vain.

Persecution justified on fabricated criminal charges

- In September 2011, police came to the home of Vladimir Nuryllayev, one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and seized Nuryllayev’s personal religious literature from the apartment where he lived with his mother and sister. Several weeks later, two police officers came to Nuryllayev’s home without a warrant, beat him in the presence of his mother, and seized his laptop computer “for examination.” On 15 November 2011, Nuryllayev was arrested. During a closed court hearing held on 18 January 2012, Nuryllayev was convicted of spreading pornography and was sentenced to four years of imprisonment. Nuryllayev repeatedly protested that the recordings had never been on his computer—his computer was very old, did not have the ability to connect to the Internet, and its disk drive did not work—it was impossible that he could copy any material.

On 17 May 2012, Nuryllayev was included in a national amnesty and released.

- Similar false charges were brought against Aibek Salayev of Dashoguz. Police officers had gone to Salayev’s home and demanded that his mother give them any religious literature that he had. They seized his netbook computer, and though it is not equipped with CD/DVD devices, he was convicted on 12 April 2012 of distributing pornography. His appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected.

While under arrest in jail, Salayev was severely beaten in his belly, head, and kidneys by the MNB (Ministry of National Security). When MNB officers got tired, they demanded that soldiers continue beating him. He was beaten until he was unconscious, his face so swollen up that he could not eat. On another occasion, he was severely beaten by a group of at least four prisoners who cooperate with the prison administration. MNB officers allege that Salayev was promoting a different religion and acting against Muslims. In the Seydi labor colony he has been threatened with more beatings and rape.

A respectful request

Jehovah’s Witnesses respectfully call upon the President of Turkmenistan as the ultimate Guarantor of the Constitution and human rights to (1) grant amnesty to the men who are imprisoned as conscientious objectors; (2) consider the introduction of a genuine alternative civilian service; and (3) allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to be officially registered in Turkmenistan.

A delegation of Jehovah’s Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Turkmenistan attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.