

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

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Working Session 14 : Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

TURKMENISTAN: Prison terms for conscientious objectors and members of unregistered religious groups

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l recommends to the government of Turkmenistan

To release objectors to military service and to adopt a legislation creating an alternative civilian service

To grant all religious communities the right of association, assembly and worship

To allow believers of any religion to share their beliefs individually or collectively

To lift censorship on the publication, production and import of religious literature

To decriminalize the religious activities of unregistered religious groups and their members

In **Turkmenistan**, young Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison for conscientious objection to military service. They have no opportunity to perform alternative civilian service as it is the case in almost all the OSCE Participating States. They are usually sentenced to terms of 12 to 24 months. Upon release, the same men have at times been prosecuted as "repeat offenders" and then placed in a strict regime prison.

While several objectors were released in the first semester of this year, others were arrested:

Pavel PAYMOV, Suhrab RAHMANBERDYEV and Admirlan TOLKACHEV are in the general regime section of the camp while Matkarim AMINOV and Dovran MATYAKUBOV are in the strict regime section.

On 7 July 2014, Merdan AMANOV was given a one-year prison sentence and was being held in pre-trial detention in Yashlyk, 40 km from Ashgabad.

Other prisoners of conscience punished for merely exercising their right to religious freedom:

Bibi RAHMANOVA (33), a mother of a four-year-old son, was sentenced under fabricated charges of "assaulting a policeman" and hooliganism on 18 August to four years in a general regime colony, a prison for criminals. On 2 September, she was released on appeal with a suspended sentence, which means she was not cleared of the charges.

Bahram SHAMURADOV (42) was sentenced on 2 July to a four-year prison term on the fabricated criminal charge of distributing pornography in the northern city of Dashoguz.

Aibek SALAYEV was sentenced to four years' imprisonment in April 2012 on the fabricated charge of "hooliganism".

Local Jehovah's Witnesses accuse the law enforcement forces of fabricating charges so that they can put an end to their proselytism activities and deter the other believers.

The government goes on denying registration to a number of Protestant communities and Jehovah's Witnesses. Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups cannot legally conduct religious activities, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, disseminating religious materials, or proselytizing. Unregistered religious activity is punished as an administrative offense, with fines ranging from the equivalent of \$125 to \$500.

Although no laws expressly prohibit holding religious services on residential property, the housing code states that communal housing should not be used for any activities other than living. The religion law states that religious services must be held at the religious group's designated location.

The domestic publication of religious literature is prohibited by decree, and the Committee for Religious Affairs must approve imported religious literature. Only registered religious groups can import literature, though with a lot of restrictions.