

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKMENISTAN

STATEMENT by the EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 22 September to 3 October 2014

Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan experience persistent violations of their fundamental human rights. Turkmenistan treats harshly conscientious objectors to military service. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses face arbitrary detention, unwarranted searches, detentions, arrests, and fines merely for exercising their religious beliefs. In a number of instances, Jehovah's Witnesses have also been imprisoned based on charges fabricated by the police.

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Restrictions of religious freedom

01 October 2014

Denial of registration

On 21 August 2008 Jehovah's Witnesses submitted an application for registration with the Gengeshi (Council) of Religious Affairs. To date, no response has been received.

Administrative Code criminalizes religious activity

On 1 January 2014 the new Code of Administrative Offence (the "Administrative Code") was enacted. Chapter 8 of the Administrative Code, "Administrative offence infringing on freedom of religion and belief," has given the state authorities to charge local representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses under article 76.1 of the Administrative Code for 'violation of procedure of religious activity.'

- **Ashgabat:** On **6 January 2014** police found Annaberdy Nunnayev and another Witness on a street and brought them to a police station. Shortly after, a court found them guilty under article 76.1 of the Administrative Code for conducting religious activity and fined both of them 720 manats (USD 245).

Abuses of religious freedom

No provision of alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors

Turkmenistan has made no provision for alternative civilian service, leading to convictions of conscientious objectors to military service. As of **August 2014**, six of Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for their conscientious objection to military service, two of whom are serving a two-year term in a strict regime prison as repeat offenders.

- **Ashgabat:** On **26 February 2014** the Ruhabad District Court sentenced Pavel Paymov, 24, to one year of imprisonment under article 219.1 of the Turkmenistan Criminal Code for his conscientious objection to military service. Since 2009, he had been granted deferment from military service due to his chronic stomach illnesses. However, following his medical examination in November 2013, the commission ignored his condition and concluded that Mr. Paymov was fit for military service. His conscientious objection to participate in military service for religious reasons brought his conviction. His appeal to the Supreme Court is ongoing.
- **Ashgabat:** On **7 July 2014** the Kopetdagskyi District Court convicted Merdan Amanov, 19, to one year imprisonment under article 219.1 of Turkmenistan Criminal Code for his conscientious objection to military service. His appeal is ongoing.

Presently, 15 complaints of conscientious objectors to military service are pending with the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR).

Arrests and fines for holding peaceful religious meetings

- **Ashgabat:** On **27 March 2014** ten police officers raided Ogulbostan Amannazarova's home, and recording the raid with a video camera, arrested everyone in attendance and took them

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to the police station. Authorities fined Mrs. Amannazarova 200 manats (USD 70) under article 76.1 of the Administrative Code for holding a religious gathering at her home.

Unwarranted searches

- **Dashoguz:** On **21 February 2014** five officers of the Police Department's unit of Serious and Organized Crime raided the residence of Zulfiya Ahmetova. The officers acted harshly towards the residents, including the elderly parents of Mrs. Ahmetova. Following the unauthorized search, Mrs. Ahmetova and her elderly mother were taken to the local municipality and pressured to sign statements against their will. Their appeal is pending.
- **Ashgabat:** On **4 April 2014** authorities unlawfully searched the home of Juma and Marala Nazarov. Mr. Nazarov was violently deprived of his mobile phone when he attempted to record the incident. Upon finding personal copies of Bible-based literature, the officers took Juma and Marala Nazarov to the police station and pressured them to sign self-incriminating statements threatening them with a fifteen-day arrest. Later they were fined 200 manats (USD70). Their appeal is pending.

Arrests, detentions, fines and imprisonment on fabricated charges

- **Dashoguz:** On **5 July 2014** police arrested Mr. Vepa Tuvakov and his wife Bibi Rahmanova at the train station after they retrieved their belongings, and confiscated their luggage and personal computer. When police found religious literature among their belongings they screamed abuses at the couple and began to beat Bibi when she attempted to record their actions. She fended off an inappropriate assault but did not resist arrest.
 - On **8 August 2014** Bibi, a 33-year-old-mother of a 4-year-old boy, was arrested by police on the fabricated claim that she "attacked a police officer" (art. 211.1) and for "hooliganism" (art. 279.2 of Criminal Code). On **August 18, 2014** the Dashoguz City Court sentenced her to four years of imprisonment.
 - On **2 September 2014** the Dashoguz Regional Court heard Bibi's appeal and ordered her immediate release. The court did not acquit her of the false charges but suspended her four-year prison sentence and imposed a "conditional sentence" of four years.
 - While imprisoned, prison officials subjected Bibi to repeated interrogations and severe abuse. Prison officials withheld medical care until 1 September for her wounds suffered weeks earlier, and Bibi continues to suffer physically from the ordeal.
 - A criminal investigation against Mrs. Rahmanova's husband, Mr. Tuvakov—whom police arrested, beat, and detained for several days—was dropped.
- **Dashoguz:** On **3 July 2014** police arrested Mansur Masharipov, seized his computer, and took him to the City Police Department where they beat him. At the Prosecutor's office he was told that they would prove that he had attacked a police officer. By the end of that day, police placed Mr. Masharipov in a drug addiction clinic. He escaped on **6 July**, as he was repeatedly threatened to be put in a prison cell where he would be subjected to homosexual rape.
- **Imprisoned on fabricated charges of distributing pornography**
 - **Dashoguz:** On **14 May 2014** police brought Bahram Shamuradov to a police station and pressured him to renounce his faith. They seized his laptop and after half an hour they came back and claimed that they found pornographic materials on it. Mr. Shamuradov was falsely accused of distributing pornography under article 164.2 of the Criminal Code.
 - On **2 July 2014** the Dashoguz City Court convicted Mr. Shamuradov to four years imprisonment. An appeal is pending with the Dashoguz Regional Court.



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- **Dashoguz:** On **7 March 2012** police officers came to the home of Aibek Salayev and forced their way inside without a search warrant or court order. The police searched the home and seized his computer. On 12 April 2012 Mr. Saliyev was convicted of distributing pornography based on fabricated charges and sentenced to four years imprisonment. He is yet serving his sentence.
- **Ashbagat:** On **18 January 2012** the Azatyksiky District Court in Ashbagat convicted Vladimir Nuryllayev on fabricated charges of distributing pornography and sentenced him to four years imprisonment. On 17 May 2012 he was amnestied and released from prison.
- On **5 May 2014** Mr. Salayev and Mr. Nuryllayev filed a joint complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR).
- **Turkmenabad:** On **11 March 2014** 14 of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested by the police and brought to the local municipality. Seven were released, and the others were placed in the cold chamber of the building under the guard of five policemen until the next evening. Early on 12 March 2014 police arrested and brought to the Serdarobat police station five other Witnesses. That evening, all 12 were brought to the Serdarobat court, which sentenced 10 of them to 15-day arrest, and fined two of them 100 manats each (USD 35). None of the accused was told of the charges on which they were actually convicted nor did they receive the court decisions. The Supreme Court Relevant eventually dismissed their appeals.

Seizure of Bibles and Bible-based literature

- **Abadan area:** On **12 April 2014** Gelman Rahmetulov was fined to pay 200 manats (USD 70) for possessing religious literature in his home. The police seized his personal religious literature and his computer because it contained religious information.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully call upon the government of Turkmenistan to:

- (1) Grant official registration to Jehovah's Witnesses;*
- (2) Grant amnesty to those imprisoned as conscientious objectors and on false charges;*
- (3) Consider the introduction of a genuine alternative civilian service;*
- (4) Desist with threats, illegal searches and seizures, false accusations, beatings, and inhumane treatment against Jehovah's Witnesses; and*
- (5) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to legally import and share their Bible based literature.*

Scan the QR code to read more information on Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan on jw.org:

