

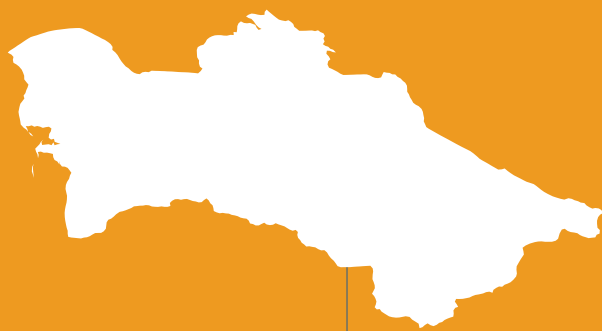
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OSCE Human
Dimension
Implementation
Meeting, Warsaw

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Turkmenistan

In the past year Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to beatings, intimidation, unwarranted searches, detention, seizure of religious publications, and fines merely for attending worship services and otherwise manifesting their religious beliefs.

- ✎ **Particularly in the Lebap region** and its city of Turkmenabat, law enforcement officers harass the Witnesses. The officers raid the Witnesses' private homes, stop them on the street, and seize their personal belongings.
- ✎ **Attempts to meet** with representatives of the Gengeshi (Council) of Religious Affairs have been unsuccessful, as have efforts at legal registration. The lack of legal registration in Turkmenistan puts Jehovah's Witnesses at risk, since the March 2016 "Law of Religion and Religious Organisations" states that all unregistered religious organisations are illegal.

Additionally, the 1 January 2014 Code of Administrative Offences includes the offence of violating the procedure for religious activity (Article 76.1). Authorities use its broad provisions to prosecute the unregistered activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in peacefully meeting together for worship.
- ✎ **Bahram Hemdemov** has been imprisoned since 14 March 2015 and is currently serving a four-year sentence in the Seydi Labour Camp LB-K 12 for his conducting a peaceful religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses in his home. Three times a year the government grants amnesty to prisoners, but Mr. Hemdemov has been overlooked each time.
- ✎ **Conscientious objection** to military service remains a problem in Turkmenistan. Although young men are no longer imprisoned as conscientious objectors, they have come under tremendous pressure to compromise their conscientious position and enlist in the military.
- ✎ **Jehovah's Witnesses** in Turkmenistan report that since **September 2016** they have experienced no administrative or criminal detentions. However, on several occasions Witnesses were held by officials for more than three hours.

BAHRAM HEMDEMOV Prisoner of Conscience

Mr. Hemdemov, 54 years old, is married and the father of four sons. At the time of his arrest, he served his congregation as an elder and was a well-respected member of the community. In May 2015 a court sentenced him to four years of hard labor in prison for holding an "illegal" religious meeting in his home. He is detained in a notoriously wretched labor camp in the town of Seydi, where he has suffered repeated interrogations and brutal beatings at the hands of the authorities. However, he has maintained his conscientious stand despite the mistreatment. Mr. Hemdemov's wife, Gulzira, has been able to visit him periodically.

Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

PHYSICAL ABUSE BY OFFICIALS

- 1. Turkmenabat. On 27 December 2016** a local sheriff, Mr. Saparov Didar, an officer of the Ministry of National Security (KGB) Mr. Mekan Veliyev, and two police officers (including Mr. A. Hudayberdyev) raided the apartment of a female Witness and her three children. They treated the family rudely as they carried out the unwarranted search, at one point grabbing the woman by her neck and pressing her against the wall. Mr. Mekan Veliyev grabbed and held the oldest daughter by her hair. Both women had bruises. The officers seized a personal copy of the Bible and brought the adult Witness to the police station. The city prosecutor's office acknowledged the complaint she later filed and confirmed the fact of the bruises, but denied any wrongdoing in the actions of police officers. A further complaint was filed with the Regional Prosecutor's Office; a response is still pending.
- 2. Turkmenabat. On 20 January 2017** about 15 law enforcement officers raided the home of a Witness family and later brought 14 of their guests to the police station. In the raid, officers seized personal copies of religious publications, some laptop computers, tablets, and mobile phones. Officers beat a male Witness, and later others as the officers demanded they provide the passwords for their tablets. Officer Suleyman hit a 14-year-old boy in his stomach and face, and threw his mother to the floor. The officers were rude and threatened all in attendance with 10-15 years of imprisonment. At 2 a.m. all were released except the homeowner and another male Witness.
- 3. Turkmenabat. On 17 May 2017** a male Witness sat on the street near his work when three officers in plainclothes approached; one officer introduced himself as Mr. Mekan Veliyev and demanded that he give them the keys to his apartment. When they found keys at his workplace, they took him to his apartment. Officers Mekan Veliyev and Haytyev twisted his hands, strangled him, threw him to the floor, and forcefully shut his mouth to keep him from calling for help. They opened the door to conduct an unauthorized search and seized his passport, personal books, and laptop computer, and then brought him to the police station. That same evening, he was fired from his employment.

HARASSMENT BY OFFICIALS

The officers abduct the Witnesses from the street to detain them at the police station, burst into homes to conduct unwarranted searches, call them in for interrogations often under false pretences, and harass small groups

gathered for peaceful worship, and confiscate personal belongings. Complaints filed regarding the officers' unjust actions do not bring relief.

Following are a few reports of harassment. Note that of the many reported incidents, two-thirds occurred in the Lebap region; more than half of all incidents in the country took place in Turkmenabat.

1. **Turkmenabat. On 18 July 2017** three police officers, including Mr. Nasyrov Murat, entered the house of a female Witness, without permission, to disrupt a religious meeting with eleven in attendance. The officers switched off the electricity in the home in order to force the group outside. After some time, another three police officers arrived, including district police officer Kabulov Sadriddin. They interrogated even a ten-year old and treated the Witnesses rudely. The officers brought a female Witness from the group to the police station and threatened her.
2. **Lebap region. On 13 June 2017** the police inspector, Mr. Merdan, invited a male Witness to the local police department for a discussion under false pretences. When he arrived, Mr. Sultan, an officer from the migration police, met him and told him that they invited him to talk about his religion. The officers claimed they needed to search his apartment because they believed that a terrorist was hiding in his home and that weapons are stored there. The Witness filed a complaint.
3. **Turkmenabat. On 22 May 2017** the local house manager came to the apartment of a female Witness. When she opened the door, two unknown men forced their way in. One of the officers was Mr. Orazov Soltan from Migration Police. The officers searched the apartment and seized her personal computer and a phone. The officers took the Witness to the police station, where they made accusations about her moral character, grabbed her by the neck, injured her hand by pressing it to the table, and threatened her with administrative liability.
4. **Mary. On 19 May 2017** police officers Mr. Shatlyk and Mr. Abdullaev Gurbanmyrat detained a female Witness and brought her to the police station by forcefully shoving her into a car, causing bruises on her arms. The officers demanded that she write an explanatory note. The chief of the police department, Mr. Hezretgulyev, demanded that she stop talking to others about her faith, and then ordered the officers to write a protocol and release her. However, Officer Mr. Shatlyk attempted to accuse her of wrongdoing. At approximately 2:00 p.m., four hours after apprehending her, Sergeant Suvkhanov had her brought to a temporary detention centre, where they kept her until approximately 6:00 p.m. The next she went to a hospital for a medical examination to confirm the rough treatment she had received. The police officers involved came to the hospital and threatened her with an administrative offence.
5. **Serakhs. On 24 February 2017** police officers and an imam rushed into the home of a female Witness, where a group of 11 were gathered together for a peaceful religious discussion. The intruders conducted

an unwarranted search and confiscated some Bibles, personal copies of religious publications, a computer, and other items. All were brought to the police station and were photographed and finger-printed.

On 28 February 2017 the Serakhs Circuit Court of the Akhal velayat imposed a penalty on six individuals for the sum of 500 manat (143 USD). The judgment was upheld on appeal.

- 6. Turkmenabat. On 30 November 2016** ten officers, including Mr. Suleyman, pounded on the door of a Witness home demanding to be let inside. A small group of eight, including four minor children, was gathered for a religious meeting. When the homeowner opened the door, the officers rushed in and began searching the house. The officers brought all but two in attendance to the police station, and detained them until 10:30 p.m.

On 8 December 2016 Officer Suleyman again came to the house, along with three other police officers. The Witness was not at home, but the officers tracked her down at the home of another Witness and brought the two women to the police station where the officers interrogated them for about four hours. The homeowner filed a complaint with the City Prosecutor's office and with the police, but has received no response.

- 7. Lebap region. On 23 November 2016** law enforcement officers, along with the sheriff Hodjayev Vepa, came to the apartment of a female Witness, pretending to conduct a census. They conducted a search without a warrant, seizing a personal copy of the Injil (Greek Scriptures in the Turkmen language) and a personal computer.

On 22 December 2016 the sheriff called the Witness, promising to return her computer. However, officers forced her into a car and brought her to court, where she was fined 500 manat (143 USD) and her computer was transferred for the benefit of the State.

- 8. Dashoguz. On 1 November 2016** a female Witness employed at a school was invited to visit the school principal. Later, both of them reported to the regional department of public education. The chief of the department told the Witness that she has to write a letter of resignation of her own will, since as one of Jehovah's Witnesses she cannot work at the school. The chief also demanded that she bring in her personal religious publications. **On 4 November 2016** the school principal again invited her to the office, where two officers questioned her about her religious beliefs.

- 9. Ashgabat. On 25 October 2016** police officers detained two female Witnesses and seized their personal copies of religious publications. Both women were fined 400 manat (114 USD).

- 10. Turkmenabat. On 7 October 2016** officers in civilian clothes detained two female Witnesses and brought them to the police station. Then one officer, Mr. Suleyman, and the district police officer conducted a search in their homes, seizing personal copies of religious literature. Mr. Suleyman demanded they write an explanation note exactly as he instructed.

When one of the women refused, he placed her in a prison cell. The Witnesses later filed a complaint and the City Prosecutor's office later confirmed the facts, but denied the officers committed any offenses.

11. Dashoguz. On 7 October 2016 a female Witness was detained on the street and brought to the police station. The officers searched her mobile phone, and threatened to inject her with drugs and send her to a rehabilitation centre or psychiatric hospital. Then they brought her to her apartment, searched it, and seized her personal copy of the Bible and her passport.

12. Turkmenabat. On 17 September 2016 two police officers, Mr. Khasanov and Mr. Yagmurov, together with five other officers in civilian clothing, broke into the home of a female Witness where a group was enjoying a peaceful religious meeting. The intruders searched the home and confiscated personal religious publications, a notebook used for work, and the woman's passport. All 12 in attendance, including the children, were brought to the police station, photographed, and made to write an explanatory note. The officers shouted and threatened all with 15 days of administrative detention. The group was detained until 2:00 a.m. A complaint filed with the City Prosecutor's office confirmed the facts but denied that the officers had committed any offence.

13. Turkmenabat. On 2 September 2016 unknown men in civilian clothing raided the private home of a female Witness. During their search they seized a personal copy of the Bible, some religious publications, and her cell phone. The officers brought her to the police station, where Officer Suleyman demanded she write an explanatory note saying that she is one of Jehovah's Witnesses but will no longer speak to others about her faith. Officer Suleyman was very rude and threatened to detain her for 15 days. Another officer, Achilov Arslan, tried to force her to say the national oath. She was kept at the police station until 8:00 p.m., nine hours after the men invaded her home.

DENIAL OF RIGHT TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE

Turkmenistan has consistently prosecuted, imprisoned, and physically mistreated conscientious objectors to military service. Among Jehovah's Witnesses, 17 conscientious objectors have filed cases with the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR), and the CCPR has issued decisions in favour of the Witnesses in ten of the cases. Turkmenistan has not yet implemented these Views of the CCPR. Five cases are yet pending.

In this reporting period, none of Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service. However, during the spring 2017 call-up to military service, representatives of the Enlistment Offices in the Lebap and Dashoguz regions attempted to forcibly send young men to military service. When young men filed written petitions requesting alter-

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native civilian service as conscientious objectors to military service, they were told that the Enlistment Offices had received instructions from “above” to send them to the army despite their refusal.

In an earlier case involving Vepa Matyakubov, he received a summons on **13 October 2016** informing him that he was considered eligible to serve in the army. He filed a written petition to the Enlistment Office requesting alternative civilian service as a conscientious objector.

- **On 14 October 2016** he was invited to the Enlistment Office, where representatives of the Enlistment Office and KGB asked him about his religion and tried to persuade him to deny his beliefs. Later, Mr. Matyakubov signed a “call-up notice” committing himself to report to the Enlistment Office **on 2 November 2016**.
- **On 18 October 2016** he received a response from the Enlistment Office stating that because he signed the “call-up notice,” he had agreed to serve in the army. Since he had not voluntarily enlisted, he did not report to the Enlistment Office and did his best to avoid the local sheriff who sought to bring him there.
- **On 24 December 2016** Mr. Matyakubov was informed by the Prosecutor’s Office that his case had been sent to the court. **On 14 February 2017** the court found him guilty under Article 219 (1) of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan and sentenced him to two years of correctional labour, meaning that 20 percent of his salary will be withheld by the state budget. Mr. Matyakubov accepted that judgment and did not want to appeal it.

STATE CENSORSHIP OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

The State allows only registered religious groups to produce, import, export, or distribute religious materials.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

1. **Turkmenabat. On 3 April 2017** a Witness was invited to come to her son’s school. The teacher was pressuring the boy, who is in the second grade, to wear a pin in the form of national flag. The school principal asked the mother to write an explanatory note. The next day, the boy’s sister, a student at the same school, was called to the office of the director of studies for the same reason. Later the girl’s teacher told her that documents concerning her were transferred to the police inspector. When the girl’s mother asked the principal to provide the legal basis for the requirement to wear a pin, the principal began to threaten her. **On 14 April 2017** the director of studies invited the girl to her office for the local police inspector to question her about her religious beliefs.

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2. **Tejen. In March 2017** the local imam held a numbers of meetings at schools and kindergartens, warning about the danger of the sect named “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and slandered the moral character of a local Witness.
 3. **Turkmenabat. On 30 January 2017** the school’s director of studies brought two Witness students of the 10th and 8th grades to her office. She demanded that they sign a paper saying that they “will not trust in other religions anymore.” Then the mother of students was invited to the office, where a police officer demanded that she explain why her children do not wear a pin in the form of the national flag, do not sing the national anthem, and do not recite the national oath. When she asked them to show her the law requiring them to do so, they threatened that they would conduct a search of her home.
 4. **Ashgabat. On 14 January 2017** a young woman was dismissed from university, the Turkmen National Institute of World Languages, because she is studying the Bible with Jehovah’s Witnesses. Prior to that, the university administration had repeatedly put her under pressure to participate in events that contradicted her religious beliefs.
 5. **Dashoguz. On 21 November 2016** a Witness was invited to visit the principal’s office in the school where her children are enrolled. When she arrived she found present her children, several teachers, and three law enforcement officers, including Mr. Merdan. The officers demanded that she explain why her children do not wear a pin in the form of the national flag; they demanded that her son recite the national oath. The teachers began to explain to the officers that her children are well-behaved, but the officers were very rude. They asked the Witness to bring her personal Bible to them. The next day they made inquiries about her husband.
 6. **Turkmenabat. On 18 October 2016** a Witness in the 10th grade was invited to visit the principal’s office. In the office two police officers, along with representatives of Islam, were present. They questioned the student and demanded that he write an explanatory note. The officers searched his cell phone.

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Positive Developments

- **On 20 December 2016** local representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Turkmenistan were invited to a special meeting in Ashgabat where some high-ranking officials of Turkmenistan and representatives of other religious organizations, including unregistered organizations, were in attendance in order to discuss their concerns.
- **On 12 May 2017** Mansur Masharipov was released from prison after serving nearly one year in prison for his religious activities.

Meetings With Officials

- **On 14 November 2016** a letter was sent to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Presidential Administration by legal representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses concerning the criminal and administrative cases initiated against Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan, which are under consideration by the CCPR. A meeting was requested, but no reply has been received
- **On 8 February 2017** the local representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan visited the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). They discussed the possibility of alternative service for Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan, and cases of MIA officers pressuring the Witnesses. The MIA representatives explained that it is part of their work to undertake certain measures in connection with Jehovah's Witnesses, including detentions and summons, but the cruel actions of some officers reflect the incompetence of those officers.

Complaints submitted by Jehovah's Witnesses pending with UN Human Rights Committee

- **Dawletow v. Turkmenistan**, No. 2316/2013, filed May 1, 2013, on issue of conscientious objection
- **Durdyev v. Turkmenistan**, No. 2268/2013, filed May 1, 2013, on issue of conscientious objection
- **Nazarov et al v. Turkmenistan**, No. 2302/2013, filed August 29, 2013 (lead case of 3), on issue of conscientious objection
- **Salayev & Nuryllayev v. Turkmenistan**, No. 2448/2014, filed May 5, 2014, arrested and detained under false charges
- **Hemdemov v. Turkmenistan**, filed 15 August 2016, arrested and detained for “illegal” religious activity

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE GOVERNMENT OF TURKMENISTAN TO:

- Release Bahram Hemdemov, who was imprisoned for peaceful religious activity
- Permit Jehovah's Witnesses to register their religious organisations in the country
- Recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide for alternative civilian service
- Allow Jehovah's Witnesses legally to import and share Bibles and their Bible-based literature
- Terminate illegal searches and seizures of religious literature from homes of believers
- Stop arresting and prosecuting people for attending peaceful religious gatherings

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Turkmenistan government.

For more information: Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org.



Visit the Newsroom at jw.org or scan here to learn more about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan.