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TURKMENISTAN: Secret police interrogate and threaten Baptist children

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

Raided by the secret police, the police and the procuracy on 16 March, the Baptist church in Balkanabad is facing new pressure. Children have been interrogated in school about "internal church life and their Christian education in their families", a statement from the church reaching Forum 18 News Service complains. They were banned from attending services and the older ones threatened with prison. A church service in a private flat was again raided on 1 April. Forum 18 was unable to reach the secret police (which the church claims organised the interrogations) or the police in Balkanabad to find out why the Baptists are being threatened for attending unregistered religious services, which are not technically illegal in Turkmenistan.

Officers of Turkmenistan's secret police, the National Security Committee (NSC), have ordered children of Baptist parents to be taken from their school classes and interrogated about "internal church life and their Christian education in their families", complains the Baptist church in the city of Balkanabad (formerly Nebit-Dag) in western Turkmenistan. "They banned the children from attending services and threatened several of them (who were older) with prison," a 3 April statement from the church reaching Forum 18 News Service reports. The church has been raided several times recently and has been banned from meeting.

Although Forum 18 was unable to verify the reports of the questions and raids independently, statements issued by the unregistered Baptists have a long track record of reliability. Forum 18 was unable to reach the NSC or the police in Balkanabad on 11 April to find out why the Baptists are being threatened for attending unregistered services, which are not technically illegal in Turkmenistan. No-one at the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in the capital Ashgabad would comment on the raids and interrogations to Forum 18 on 11 April.

The church reports that the interrogation of the children was carried out by police officers, who wanted to know how many copies of the Bible their families had at home and what other religious literature they had. The church complains that the interrogations took place without the parents' knowledge and in their absence. They add that in addition several church members were summoned to the police. "There they were banned with threats from attending services."

The interrogations followed a raid by eight NSC, police and procuracy officials on the church's Sunday morning worship service on 16 March (see F18News 21 March 2003). The Baptist congregation belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where it operates.

Even had its congregations wished to register in Turkmenistan that would have been impossible: the highly restrictive religion law requires each individual religious community seeking registration to have 500 adult citizen members who live in one district of a city or one rural district. In addition, there is an unpublished ban on registering congregations of any faiths other than Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox.

Raids on the church have continued. Six officials swooped on an evening service held by the church in a private flat on 1 April. "None of them gave their names, but among them was local police inspector Govher Kurbanova," the church reported. "They again banned them from meeting and threatened to confiscate from the owner the flat where we meet for worship."

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