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TURKMENISTAN: Haj pilgrimage promises still not honoured

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

Very senior officials in Turkmenistan have claimed that Muslim pilgrims wishing to undertake the haj would be free to do so. However, Turkmenistan continues to only permit one government-controlled aircraft of pilgrims - 188 people - to travel, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The pilgrims include members of the MSS secret police and other officials. Pilgrims are selected "under complete government control", one source told Forum 18, and need the approval of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs and of their local Khyakimliks (administrations). Saudi Arabia, which sets haj pilgrimage numbers, would be prepared to allow 5,000 people to make the pilgrimage from Turkmenistan, and Iran has offered the opportunity for pilgrims to travel by bus. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov himself earlier this year made the umra ("minor pilgrimage") to Mecca, but has not yet honoured promises to allow anyone to make the pilgrimage. Serious violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief continue against people of all faiths.

Despite claims by very senior government officials that Muslim pilgrims to Mecca would this year be allowed to travel outside the framework of the state-assembled group, only one planeload of pilgrims - 188 people - was able to travel on the haj this year, the Saudi Embassy and independent observers in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] told Forum 18 News Service. The haj quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities is believed to be about 5,000. Turkmenistan's controls on haj pilgrims are the strictest in Central Asia. The pilgrims include members of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police and other officials. Selection of pilgrims remains "under complete government control", one source told Forum 18 from Ashgabad.

The haj pilgrimage is compulsory at least once in their lifetime for Muslims who are able to perform it (there are exemptions, for example for ill health) within Dhu al-Hijja, the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar. However, given that for many years the Turkmen authorities have allowed no more than 188 pilgrims each year, this is an obligation that the vast majority of the country's Muslims are unable to fulfil.

Very senior Turkmen officials had told foreign visitors to Ashgabad in recent months that while the planeload of pilgrims would travel - as in earlier years - at government expense, pilgrims wishing to undertake the haj at their own expense would be free to do so this year, sources told Forum 18. However, this has not happened.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why independent would-be pilgrims have been unable to travel, why the government limits the number of pilgrims to just 188 out of a potential number of thousands and why would-be pilgrims need the approval of state agencies before they can take part.

Turkmenistan has in previous years also limited haj pilgrimage numbers to fewer than five per cent of the potential pilgrims. Forum 18 was told in December 2005 that "all those allowed to go are first checked out, presumably by the Interior Ministry and the MSS secret police" (see F18News 5 January 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=7111>).

The telephones at the government's Gengeshi [Council] for Religious Affairs went unanswered on 11 and 13 December 2007. An official of the Middle East Department of the Foreign Ministry in Ashgabad told Forum 18 on 13 December he had no information about the haj process and that no-one at the ministry was competent to answer Forum 18's questions. The official at the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights who answered the telephone on 13 December told Forum 18 that the director, Shirin Akhmedova, and Institute official Shemshat Atajanova were both out at a meeting and that no-one else was present who could answer Forum 18's questions.

An official of the MSS secret police in Ashgabad was unwilling to talk. Reached on 12 December, he asked: "Where did you get this number from?" before putting down the phone.

"The quota for individual countries is determined by the Saudi authorities, but the composition of the delegations is determined by the authorities of individual countries," an observer who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 12 December. "Only those who have been approved by the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs are able to go from Turkmenistan." The observer said the Gengeshi arranged visas and the aeroplane for the group. "All other means of travelling are 'unapproved' and in practice are banned by the Turkmen government."

Iranian officials are known to have offered the Turkmenistan authorities the opportunity for haj pilgrims to travel by bus through Iran on their way to Mecca. On 29 November the Russian website Iran.ru, quoting Islamic Republic of Iran Radio, reported the offer from Mohammed Javad Atrchian of the Iranian Ministry for Roads and Transportation. The agency said preliminary plans had already been drawn up. However, these came to nothing.

A diplomat of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ashgabad, who preferred not to be identified, said that haj pilgrims travelled from Turkmenistan only by aeroplane. "It said in their visas in Arabic that they would travel by air. It is too far to travel overland by bus," he told Forum 18 on 13 December. "There was an agreement to fly to Abu Dhabi and then on to Jeddah." The diplomat could not confirm the quota allocated to Turkmenistan, nor how many haj visas were issued by the consulate this year. However, he confirmed that only one aeroplane was used to transport the pilgrims.

As in earlier years, the state gave wide coverage to the departure from Ashgabad on 6 December of the aeroplane containing the 188 approved pilgrims. Official coverage stressed that by decree of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, free tickets were issued to the pilgrims by the state-run airline. The government website said the pilgrims are due to return to Turkmenistan on 26 December.

Would-be pilgrims need approval not just from the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad, but from local Khyakimliks (administrations) where they live. However, officials in the religious affairs departments of two district Khyakimliks in Ashgabad and the city Khyakimlik in the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi, formerly Krasnovodsk] refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 13 December about the selection procedure for would-be pilgrims.

A member of a mosque in Ashgabad, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 on 12 December that three fellow-members of the mosque are part of this year's pilgrim group. He confirmed that the arrangements had been made through the local Khyakimlik and the Muftiate. "They went by plane and the state paid for their ticket," the mosque member confirmed. However, he declined to discuss details of the procedure for how would-be pilgrims are chosen and checked out by the state authorities. Members of two other Ashgabad mosques declined to answer Forum 18's questions.

Speaking to Forum 18 back in October 2006, one Ruhnama teacher - who preferred not to be identified - defended the government's controls on the number of pilgrims going on the haj to Mecca. He said lists of applicants are held by the religious affairs officials in each local administration, adding that he was 3,000th on the list (see F18News 21 December 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894>).

In April 2007 President Berdymukhammedov went on pilgrimage to Mecca, which Turkmen state TV described on 14 April as "compulsory for every Muslim". However, Berdymukhammedov went on the umra (sometimes called "the minor pilgrimage"), not the haj (see F18News 23 April 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=946>).

The Turkmen government's continuing restrictions on freedom of movement - which include the requirement that people wishing to travel abroad get permission from the local authorities and selective foreign travel bans on individuals the government does not like - have also restricted religious visits. Several prominent religious leaders and activists remain on exit blacklists, while local religious communities are unable to invite their fellow-believers from abroad (see F18News 31 May 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790>).

There has been no change in the exit blacklist policy since President Berdymukhammedov came to power. Numerous serious religious freedom violations continue against people of all faiths. These include Baptist pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky being forced into exile away from his home and family, a mullah being forcibly detained in a psychiatric hospital, and Jehovah's Witnesses facing trial for refusing on grounds of conscience (see F18News 4 December 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1057>). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728>.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815>.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>>.

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