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TURKMENISTAN: May trial for imprisoned Baptist leader?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The criminal trial of imprisoned Baptist leader Vyacheslav Kalataevsky may begin very soon, his wife has told Forum 18 News Service. "The court will not tell me officially when the trial is due to start, but we have indications it could be on 2 or 4 May," Valentina Kalataevskaya told Forum 18. Kalataevsky was arrested at his home by the MSS secret police on charges of illegally crossing the border. His wife is convinced that "although officials don't mention it, I believe there is a religious motivation to the case." In 2001 he was expelled from Turkmenistan, where he was born and lives, during a campaign of expulsions of foreign passport holders engaged in religious activity. Since Kalataevsky's arrest on 12 March, his wife has been denied access to him. There has also been no progress in the case of Merdan Shirmedov, a Protestant denied permission to leave Turkmenistan to join his pregnant wife in the USA. Officials have refused to discuss these cases, and the case of the imprisoned former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, with Forum 18.

The wife of imprisoned Baptist leader Vyacheslav Kalataevsky has told Forum 18 News Service that she expects his criminal trial, on charges of illegally crossing the border in 2001, to begin very soon at the City Court in the Caspian Sea port of Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbashi] (formerly Krasnovodsk). "The court will not tell me officially when the trial is due to start, but we have indications it could be on 2 or 4 May," Valentina Kalataevskaya told Forum 18 from Turkmenbashi on 20 April. She said the case was registered at the court on 16 April and Judge Bayram Mukhamedov is due to name the date for the trial.

The telephone at Turkmenbashi City Court went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 20 April.

Valentina Kalataevskaya told Forum 18 that the last time that she saw her husband was on 12 March, the day he was arrested by the State Security Ministry (MSS) secret police, when she caught sight of him being transferred into a car at one of Turkmenbashi's police stations. She said that, after being held in the regional capital Balkanabad (formerly Nebit-Dag), he was transferred in mid-April to Prison Number 5 in Turkmenbashi where he remains. "They still won't allow me to see him," she complained.

Kalataevsky – who was born in the then Krasnovodsk but holds a Ukrainian passport – faces charges of illegal border crossing under Article 214 of the Criminal Code, which prescribes a punishment of up to two years' imprisonment for first time offenders acting on their own. However, his wife insists he is being punished for his religious activity. "Although officials don't mention it, I believe there is a religious motivation to the case," she told Forum 18. "They won't take into account that he was expelled across the border into Kazakhstan in 2001, as a punishment for preaching the Gospel."

The first MSS secret police investigator, Selbi Charyeva, who completed her investigation on 28 March, refused absolutely to discuss Kalataevsky's case with Forum 18 (see F18News 29 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=938). No new prosecutor was named, Kalataevskaya added, and the case was handed to the regional prosecutor's office and then Turkmenbashi City Court.

Kalataevskaya said that she has received a response from the General Prosecutor's Office. They told her that her husband was being held under orders from the prosecutor, that he was being prosecuted for crossing the border illegally and that he had admitted his guilt. She insisted that, had the authorities had the legal right to deport him in 2001, they legally should have sent him to Ukraine and issued him with a deportation certificate. Instead, Turkmen authorities took him over the border to neighbouring Kazakhstan, where they dumped him with no money and no documents. "It was wrong of them to take him to Kazakhstan," she told Forum 18.

Kalataevsky – a leading member of the local congregation of the Council of Churches Baptists – was summarily deported in 2001 as the authorities completed their campaign of expelling all foreign citizens prominent in Muslim, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna communities. At that time, all non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity was illegal in Turkmenistan. Even today, the activities of the Council of Churches Baptists remain illegal, as they refuse on principle to be registered by the state.

Meanwhile, there has been no progress in the case of the Protestant Merdan Shirmedov, who has been denied permission to leave Turkmenistan to join Wendy Lucas, his pregnant wife in the United States. "I have written to Meret Orazov, the Turkmen ambassador in Washington, but had no response and I have also taken up the case with American politicians," Lucas told Forum 18 from Washington on 20 April. "Merdan has also approached the mission in the capital Ashgabad (Ashgabat) of the Organisation for

Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)."

Shirmedov was denied permission to leave Turkmenistan on 6 January 2007. Lucas told Forum 18 she believes this was in retaliation for the prominent role his family has in an ethnic Turkmen Protestant fellowship in their home town of Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in northern Turkmenistan (see F18News 29 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=938).

Lucas said that on 10 April, Shirmedov tried to cross the nearby border to Uzbekistan, but was prevented from leaving after Turkmen border guards found his name on a computerised exit ban list. However, they refused to tell him why he was barred from leaving. Border guards and the MSS secret police work both together and separately in barring people from leaving the country, a Migration Service official has told Forum 18 (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

An aide to Ambassador Orazov at the Turkmen Embassy in Washington, Nury (who refused to give his last name), said that in the absence of the ambassador - who returns to the Embassy on 2 May - he has no official comment about Shirmedov's case. "I have no information on this case," he told Forum 18 on 20 April. "I am sure if they have written to the Ambassador, he has transferred the letter to the Foreign Ministry in Ashgabad." Asked why Turkmenistan still operates an exit ban list for its own citizens, he responded: "That question exceeds my authority."

He likewise had no information about the apparent continued imprisonment of the former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who was sentenced at a closed trial in Ashgabad in March 2004. His family is increasingly concerned that it has had no recent news about him (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=914). Nury claimed not even to have heard about his case.

As Nury suggested, Forum 18 has submitted written questions to Ambassador Orazov about why Shirmedov is being prevented from leaving his own country, why the exit ban list remains and whether the former chief mufti is still alive and, if so, where he is being held.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov has this month been on a pilgrimage to Mecca which Turkmen state TV described on 14 April as "compulsory for every Muslim." The haj pilgrimage is compulsory for Muslims who are able to perform it (there are exemptions) within Dhu al-Hijja, the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar – which is not this month.

The country every year severely restricts the numbers of haj pilgrims to the number who will fit on one airliner of the state-run Turkmenistan Airlines. This is far below the quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884). The numbers of genuine pilgrims actually permitted by the country is almost certainly smaller than this, as Forum 18 has been informed that members of the MSS secret police are included among the pilgrims.

In a related report, the Ashgabat-based Neytralnyy Turkmenistan newspaper on 14 April claimed that "every Turkmen citizen is free to practise his religion." Religious believers and human rights activists inside and outside the country have noted that officials have a vested interest in continuing to attack religious freedom (see F18News 21 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=894). (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

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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