



## Turkmenistan

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion; however, in practice the Government continued to restrict the free practice of religion. All groups must register in order to gain legal status; unregistered religious activity is illegal and may be punished by administrative fines.

There were small improvements in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, but troubling developments in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. During the reporting period, government promotion of the Ruhnama decreased, two religious groups were registered, and the former mufti of the country was pardoned and given an official government position. However, the Government threatened members of minority religious groups with fines, loss of employment and housing, and imprisonment because of their beliefs. There were also reports of raids. The Government also continued arresting and charging Jehovah's Witnesses who conscientiously objected to military service.

There were no reports of societal abuses or violence based on religious beliefs or practice. The overwhelming majority of citizens identify themselves as Sunni Muslim; ethnic Turkmen identity is linked to Islam. Turkmen society has historically been tolerant and inclusive of different religious beliefs. However, ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert to other religious groups, especially the lesser known Protestant groups, are viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the period covered by this report, U.S. embassy representatives and U.S. State Department officials raised religious freedom concerns in meetings with government officials and urged greater support for religious freedom. The Embassy hosted three roundtables for registered and unregistered minority religious groups during the reporting period. Improving registration procedures for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including religious organizations, and permitting them to meet regularly were top U.S. government priorities.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 188,457 square miles and a population of five million. Statistics regarding religious affiliation were not available. According to the Government's most recent census (1995), ethnic Turkmen constitute 77 percent of the population. Minority ethnic populations include Uzbeks (9.2 percent), Russians (6.7 percent), and Kazakhs (2 percent). Armenians, Azeris, and other ethnic groups comprise the remaining 5.1 percent. The majority religion is Sunni Muslim, and Russian Orthodox Christians constitute the largest religious minority. The level of active religious observance is unknown.

Since independence there has been a tightly controlled revival of Islam. During the Soviet era, there were only four mosques operating; now there are 398, according to the Government's Council on Religious Affairs (CRA). Ethnic Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Baloch living in Mary Province are predominantly Sunni Muslim. There are small pockets of Shi'a Muslims, many of whom are ethnic Iranians, Azeris, or Kurds living along the border with Iran and in Turkmenbashy.

Restrictive government control, indigenous Islamic culture, and 70 years of Soviet rule have meant that traditional mosque-based Islam does not play a dominant role in society. Local interpretations of Islam place a heavy premium on rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, featuring music and dancing that more

traditional Muslims view as unorthodox. Together with shrine pilgrimage, such rituals play a greater role in local Muslims' expression of Islam than regular prayer at mosques.

While the 1995 census indicated that ethnic Russians comprised almost 7 percent of the population, subsequent emigration to Russia and elsewhere is continuing to reduce this proportion. Most ethnic Russians and Armenians are Christian. Practicing Russian Christians are generally members of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). There are 13 Russian Orthodox churches, 3 of which are in Ashgabat. A priest resident in Ashgabat leads the Russian Orthodox Church within the country. In October 2007 the Government began negotiations to have the religious jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan shifted from the Central Asian Russian Orthodox Church Diocese in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and placed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. In May 2008 subordination to the Moscow Patriarchate became official as a result of an official meeting between President Berdimuhamedov and Russian Orthodox Church officials. There is one convent in Ashgabat, but there are no Russian Orthodox seminaries.

Ethnic Russians and Armenians comprise a significant percentage of members of unregistered religious congregations; ethnic Turkmen are increasingly represented among these groups as well. There are small communities of the following unregistered denominations: the Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and several evangelical Christian groups including "Separate" Baptists, charismatic groups, Pentecostals, and an unaffiliated, nondenominational group.

A very small community of ethnic Germans, most of whom live in and around the city of Saragt, reportedly includes practicing Lutherans. Approximately 1,000 ethnic Poles live in the country; they have been largely absorbed into the Russian community and consider themselves Russian Orthodox. The Catholic community in Ashgabat, which includes both citizens and foreigners, meets in the chapel of the Vatican Nunciature.

An estimated 1,000 Jews live in the country. Most are members of families who came from Ukraine during World War II. There are some Jewish families living in Turkmenabat, on the border with Uzbekistan, who are known as Bukharan Jews, referring to the Uzbek city of Bukhara. There are no synagogues or rabbis, and Jews continue to emigrate to Israel, Russia, and Germany; however, the Jewish population remains relatively constant. The community gathers for religious observances but does not wish to register as a religious group.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government restricts these rights. The Criminal Code outlaws violations of religious freedom or persecution by private actors; in practice it is not enforced. Throughout 2004 the Government issued a series of amendments to the 2003 law on religion, which replaced the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations and its subsequent amendments in 1995 and 1996. The 2003 law on religion required all religious organizations to register, made operation of unregistered religious organizations a criminal offense, restricted religious education, and monitored financial and material assistance to religious groups from foreign sources.

In January 2004 Former President Niyazov signed a decree that amended the 2003 law on religion by increasing registration fees for religious organizations to approximately \$178 (2.5 million manat). In addition, the decree relieved the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) of the obligation to publish in the local media a list of registered religious organizations for transparency. Without a published list, legally registered groups were more isolated, and the public was less able to respond when authorities harassed registered groups. The law also gave the MOJ the right to cancel a group's registration based on vaguely defined charges.

In March 2004 the Government published amendments to the 2003 law on religion that reduced numerical thresholds for registration from 500 members to 5 and made all minority groups eligible to register. The amendments established two legal categories for religious communities: religious groups (comprising at least 5 and fewer than 50 members of legal age) and religious organizations (comprising at least 50 members). The amendments leave significant gray areas in the law that permit the Government to delay registration.

Later that same month in 2004, the Government adopted but did not publish an implementing regulation and

recommended standard charter, which stipulated harsh requirements for religious groups wishing to register. The decree imposed financial and travel restrictions on registered religious organizations.

In response to international pressure, a May 2004 presidential decree publicly disavowed the unpublished March regulations and lifted criminal penalties for unregistered religious practice. However, the remaining civil law continues to allow the Government to control religious life and to restrict the activities of all religious groups.

Until June 2004 government entities at all levels, including the courts, had interpreted the laws in such a way as to discriminate against those practicing any faith other than Sunni Islam or Russian Orthodox Christianity, whose congregations represented the only two registered religious groups. In the year following the March 2004 decree reducing the numerical requirement for registration, nine religious groups registered: the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church of Turkmenistan, Seventh-day Adventist Church of Turkmenistan, Baha'i Community of Turkmenistan, Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), Full Gospel Christian Church of Turkmenistan (Pentecostals), Light of the East Church (Dashoguz Pentecostal Church), Greater Grace Church of Turkmenistan, International Church of Christ, and the New Apostolic Church of Turkmenistan. The Ashgabat parish of the Russian Orthodox Church was reregistered in 2005 and the Turkmenabat parish reregistered in January 2006. The Source of Life Church in Turkmenabat and a Muslim group in Ahal were registered in late 2007.

Shi'a Muslim groups have been allowed to register collectively as an organization, according to the CRA. Deputy CRA Chairman Gurbanov stated that the Shi'a are registered as one organization but did not say when the Shi'a were registered.

In October 2005 the Government announced a temporary procedure for the registration of religious groups' regional branches by issuing powers of attorney. MOJ representatives also stated that amendments would be made to the 2003 law on religion that would codify the branch registration issue, but this did not occur during the reporting period.

There were indications the Government planned to modify previous policies regarding religious freedom through the revision of the 2004 Law on Religion, but the law was not revised during the reporting period.

The government-appointed CRA reports to the president and ostensibly acts as an intermediary between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organizations. It includes Sunni Muslim imams and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as government representatives, but no representatives of minority religious groups. In practice the CRA acts as an arm of the state, exercising direct control over the hiring, promotion, and firing of both Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy as well as helping to control all religious publications and activities. Its writ is enforced by security forces, specifically the Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and it has no role in promoting interfaith dialogue.

Although the Government does not officially favor any religion, it has provided financial and other support to the CRA for the construction of new mosques. The Government also pays most Muslim clerics' salaries, approves all senior cleric appointments, and requires the latter to report regularly to the CRA.

Both registered and unregistered minority religious communities experience difficulty in obtaining facilities to use for worship. Legal and governmental obstacles hindered or prevented the ability of religious groups to purchase or rent land or buildings for worship or meetings. Registered and unregistered groups also experienced difficulty in using private homes for worship or study. Although there are no laws that expressly prohibit holding religious services in private homes, Article 7 of the housing code says that communal housing should not be used for any activities other than living. The code does not address the issue of private homes being used for religious gatherings. Government officials stated that groups are permitted to hold services in private homes as long as the neighbors do not complain. However, government policies, including those at the city level such as zoning regulations on the use of private residences, have created difficulties for some groups seeking places to hold worship services. Two registered religious groups, the Baha'i community and the Krishna Consciousness Society, were permitted to conduct worship meetings in homes, but other groups, such as the Word of Life Church in Turkmenbashi, were told by local authorities that they were breaking the law. The 2003 law on religion does not address the legality of holding religious activities in localities other than

where a group is registered.

Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups are forbidden to conduct religious activities, including gathering, disseminating religious materials, and proselytizing. Government authorities at times disrupted meetings of unregistered religious groups. Participants in those groups are subject to fines and administrative (not criminal) arrest under the administrative code.

The law prohibits foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organizations. The Government denies visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. The law does not restrict the ability of foreigners to worship with Turkmen religious groups.

By decree, publishing religious literature is prohibited, and the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Only registered religious groups can import literature. When the CRA approves the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. Only religious leaders may wear religious garb publicly.

The Government has incorporated some aspects of Islamic tradition in its effort to redefine a national identity. For example the Government has built large, monumental mosques in Ashgabat, Gokdepe, and Gypjak, and plans to build at least two more in Mary and Konye-Urgench. Despite its embrace of certain aspects of Islamic culture, the Government is concerned about foreign Islamic influence and the interpretation of Islam by local believers. The Government promotes a moderate understanding of Islam based on Turkmen religious and national traditions.

During the reporting period, the CRA scaled back considerably its previous policy of promoting former President Niyazov's spiritual-social book, *Ruhnama* and *Ruhnama II*, by teaching them as holy texts and placing them next to the Qur'an in some mosques. The *Ruhnama* is no longer seen in mosques, including the large mosque in former President Niyazov's home village of Gypjak. Phrases from the *Ruhnama* are, however, are still inscribed on the Gypjak mosque.

Mosques and Muslim clergy are state-sponsored and financed. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups are independently financed. The Government recognizes only Sunni Muslim holy days as national holidays. These include Gurban Bairam (Eid al-Adha), a 3-day holiday commemorating the end of the Hajj, and Oraza-Bairam (Eid al-Fitr), commemorating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting.

The Government does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, which was provided by law until 1995. The penalty for refusing to serve in the armed forces under Article 219, Part 1 of the Criminal Code is up to 2 years' imprisonment. Individuals who refuse military service for religious reasons are offered noncombatant roles within the military but are not provided with nonmilitary service alternatives. Until June 2007 conscripted members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were returned home unharmed several days after being called up, although they were not given papers excusing them from military service, which are needed for employment. This policy changed in June 2007, however, when three Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and charged with avoiding military service. Most of these Jehovah's Witnesses, though not all, were subsequently pardoned or given suspended sentences.

Although some independent religious education exists, the Government has done nothing to promote religious education, and there is no official religious instruction in public schools. The Government requires all public schools and institutes of higher learning to hold regular instruction on the *Ruhnama*, but teachers reported that such training had decreased substantially. The Ministry of Education requires that each student study the *Ruhnama* for 1 hour each week.

Article Six of the November 2004 law allows mosques to provide religious education to children after school for 4 hours a week with the approval of parents. Persons who graduate from institutions of higher religious education (the law does not specify domestic or international institutions) and who obtain CRA approval may provide religious education. Citizens have the right to receive religious education individually or with other persons; however, the law prohibits providing religious education in private, and those who do so are subject to punitive legal action. Some Sunni mosques have regularly scheduled classes on the Qur'an.

Unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups are prohibited from providing religious education. The 2003 law prohibits the Russian Orthodox Church from conducting religious education programs without CRA and presidential approval, and there were no reports that either the CRA or the President approved such programs. Homeschooling usually is allowed only in cases of severe illness or disability and not for religious reasons.

In 2004 the Government formally lifted the exit visa requirement, theoretically permitting travel by all those who wished to participate in the Hajj or other travel for religious purposes.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government officially has banned only extremist groups advocating violence, but it also categorized Islamic groups advocating stricter interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine as "extremist." The activities of unregistered religious groups remained illegal, with violators subject to fines and administrative arrest under the administrative code.

During the reporting period, at least three religious groups who have applied for registration continued to be denied legal status--the Abadan branch of Light of Life Christian Church applied for registration in January 2007, the Word of Life Church in Turkmenbashi's registration application was rejected in October 2007 for improper grammar and insufficient membership, and the Turkmen Baptist Church in Dashoguz applied in 2006. The Hare Krishna Society was also told by the Government that they could register branch groups. They submitted an application in 2007, but no progress had been made by the end of the reporting period.

The Roman Catholic Church remained unregistered because of a conflict with local law requiring that the head of the Church be a citizen of the country. Other groups either remained fearful of registering, citing the amount and type of information the Government requires, or refused on principle to do so.

Registered religious minority groups reported sporadic instances of harassment. Regional affiliates of registered groups experienced harassment by provincial and district law enforcement agencies. Some of these groups found that by routinely notifying the Government of their gatherings and events and inviting government representatives to attend, they experienced decreased government harassment.

The Government restricted unregistered religious groups from establishing places of worship, and violations constituted an administrative offense. Registered groups also experienced difficulties establishing and maintaining places of worship; several groups stated that their largest obstacles were administrative hurdles or the lack of funds to rent a public hall. Several groups said they would prefer to buy a worship center or land to establish a permanent one, but municipal authorities raised insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles. Five registered minority religious groups have established public places of worship; three were rented and two were private residential homes of group members. The Government restricted some worship services in private homes. The Government forbids unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups from gathering publicly or privately and can punish individuals or groups who violate these prohibitions. Some unregistered congregations continued to practice quietly, largely in private homes.

The Government also controls access to Islamic education. The theology faculty in the history department at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat is the only academic faculty to conduct Islamic education. In December 2007 the CRA told U.S. officials that it planned to reestablish a separate theology faculty, reversing former President Niyazov's decision to merge the faculty with the history department in 2005. There was no evidence that the faculty had been put in place by the end of the reporting period.

The Government does not officially restrict persons from changing their religious beliefs and affiliation, but ethnic Turkmen members of unregistered religious groups accused of proselytizing and disseminating religious material generally receive harsher treatment than nonethnic Turkmen.

There were three high-level officials in the Government of Russian Jewish heritage and at least one deputy minister who was Russian Orthodox. No representatives of other minority religious groups were known to be working at senior or mid-level government positions during the reporting period. Some minority religious group adherents remained members of the only political party but feared openly acknowledging their faith out of

concern for political reprisal.

The Government monitors minority religious groups, particularly those perceived to have connections with or support from a supranational hierarchy. The law prohibits foreign missionary activity, although in practice both Christians and Muslims working in the country in other capacities engaged in religious outreach. The 2003 law on religion stipulated that religious groups must report any financial or material assistance received from foreign sources. The Government denies visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity.

By decree, publishing religious literature is prohibited, limiting the availability of Qur'ans, Bibles, and other religious literature. Sacred religious books are rarely available for purchase. In practice the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Since all members of the CRA are either government officials, Sunni Muslims, or members of the Russian Orthodox Church, minority religious groups are disadvantaged regarding importation of religious materials. When the CRA approves the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. All religious groups are also reportedly prohibited from subscribing to any foreign publications. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan cannot receive the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* or other ROC publications. The Dashoguz office of the CRA required that its officers stamp religious literature, including Bibles and Qur'ans, in order to authorize them.

President Niyazov's books, *Ruhnama* and *Ruhnama II*, continued to be visible in some educational institutions and government offices, but embassy contacts reported the emphasis on studying the books had diminished significantly. The book appeared to have been quietly removed from many mosques during the reporting period. There was no information to indicate that clerics still preached *Ruhnama* ideology in their services.

The Government continued to prohibit some individuals from traveling abroad, including in cases where individuals wanted to travel outside the country for the purpose of religious study or to attend religious conferences. Until August 2007 a Protestant from an ethnic Turkmen fellowship in Dashoguz had been prevented from leaving the country to join his pregnant wife. In November 2007 the pastor of Turkmen Pentecostal Church was removed from an aircraft bound for Kiev and told he was barred from traveling abroad. Former Baptist prisoner of conscience Shageldy Atakov was reportedly banned from leaving the country because of his religious activity and was denied exit permission in June 2007.

The Government financially sponsored 188 pilgrims (one plane load), personally approved by the President, of the country's quota of 4,600, to travel to Mecca. The national airline provided transportation free of charge. The Government stated that other pilgrims were allowed to go on the Hajj at their own expense, and there were indications that significantly more self-financing pilgrims were allowed to attend the Hajj. One contact, who indicated that she had paid her own way, left on a separate aircraft a day after the government-sponsored aircraft left for Mecca. Forum 18 reported that no more than 188 pilgrims from the country went on the Hajj. However, an authoritative source with access to the information reported more than 1,000 Turkmen participated in the Hajj. In April 2007 President Berdimuhamedov visited Saudi Arabia and performed umrah (minor pilgrimage) rituals in Mecca, recalling former President Niyazov's 1992 umrah.

Some foreign members of registered and unregistered religious groups continued to be denied entry visas.

Several registered religious minority groups reported that the Government monitored them by attending their gatherings; nonetheless, communities continued to engage in regular activities. Officers from the Sixth Department in Ashgabat, the division charged with fighting organized crime and terrorism, were charged with monitoring members of religious minorities.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of religious groups with respect to employment.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

Mistreatment of some registered and unregistered religious minority group members continued during this reporting period. The Government threatened members of minority religious groups with fines, loss of registration, loss of employment and housing, and imprisonment because of their beliefs. There were also

reports of raids and the seizure of religious materials.

On May 6, 2008, local police in Balkanabat raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness and arrested the four adult residents. Police reportedly beat them and demanded that they say "I am a Muslim" and sign a confession. When they refused, they were stripped and beaten with a rubber cable. The four eventually signed a written explanation of their arrest and confiscation of personal belongings, consent to what had taken place, and a confession; they were fined approximately \$88 (1.25 million manats).

On December 18, 2007, Ashirgeldy Taganov, a member of Jehovah's Witness, was given an 18-month suspended sentence for refusing compulsory military service on the grounds of religious conscience. According to the terms of the suspended sentence, Taganov had to remain in Ashgabat, be in his home by 8 p.m., and find work. Taganov was reportedly pardoned on February 13, 2008.

On December 11, 2007, Baptist Pastor and Ukrainian citizen Vyacheslav Kalataevsky was deported, following his release from prison in November 2007. Government authorities denied his requests for a residence visa that would have enabled him to remain with his wife and children in Turkmenbashi. During the interim period before his deportation and after his release, Forum 18 reported that government authorities prevented him from meeting with his congregation. Ministry of National Security (MNB) officials arrested Kalataevsky on March 12, 2007, and on May 14 he was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment in a labor camp on criminal charges of illegally crossing the border in 2001. In 2001 authorities had deported Kalataevsky without documents to Kazakhstan, and after a week he crossed back into the country to rejoin his wife and children.

On November 11, 2007, Turkmen Pentecostal Church Pastor Ilmyrat Nurlyyev was removed from an aircraft bound for Kiev and told he was barred from traveling abroad. His destination had been an annual religious conference in Ukraine.

Suleiman Udaev, a member of Jehovah's Witness, was fined and given a sentence of 18 months' imprisonment on August 7, 2007, for preaching. He was released from prison on September 12, 2007, after his sentence was commuted to a 2-year suspended sentence with compulsory labor. Udaev was later pardoned on October 9, 2007.

In July 2007 four Jehovah's Witnesses, Aleksandr Zuyev, Nuryagdy Gayirov, Bayram Ashirgeldiyev, and Begench Shakhmuradov, were given 2-year suspended sentences for refusing compulsory military service. Zuyev and Gayirov were pardoned on October 9, 2007, but by the end of the reporting period Ashirgeldiyev and Shakhmuradov had not been pardoned.

The leader of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Turkmenbashi, Yevgeny Potolov, was deported for a second time in July 2007 and told he would be banned from entering the country for 1 year. A Forum 18 report speculated that Potolov, a Russian citizen, was arrested in May 2007 for entering the country illegally. In 2001 authorities had deported Potolov to Kazakhstan, but he later returned to the country to rejoin his wife and children.

During incidents involving police detaining and questioning members of unregistered minority religious groups, authorities took a range of actions including: filming those present; recording the names, addresses, and places of work of the congregants; threatening fines and imprisonment; and confiscating religious literature. With the exception of the Kalataevsky and Potolov cases, there were no reports of prolonged detention or physical abuse.

The widely respected former mufti of the country, Nasrullah Ibn Ibadullah, who had been imprisoned since 2004, was pardoned on August 11, 2007, and given an official post as an advisor to the CRA in Ashgabat. Ibadullah had been dismissed as mufti in 2003, reportedly in part for his refusal to teach the Ruhnama as a sacred text. In March 2004 he was secretly tried and convicted, reportedly for his alleged role in a failed 2002 attack on President Niyazov's motorcade. Ibn Ibadullah's replacement, Kakageldi Wepayev, was subsequently placed under house arrest for "misbehavior"--allegedly including drinking and womanizing--and replaced in 2004 by then 27-year-old recent seminary graduate Rowshen Allaberdiyev.

The fate of an estimated 30 suspected "Wahhabis" reportedly detained in Ashgabat in August 2005 remained

unknown.

On April 22, 2008, local police raided a small religious gathering and detained Timur Muradov, the pastor of the unregistered Word of Life Church in Turkmenbashi, along with two unauthorized Azerbaijani religiously oriented visitors to his church, for holding an "unauthorized gathering." The police questioned him for several hours, reportedly hit him on the head with a book, and attempted to coerce him into abandoning his religious activities. One official also suggested that some heroin might be planted in Muradov's pocket to give them a reason to arrest him. The two Azerbaijanis were immediately deported because they had come into the country on tourist visas rather than as declared church workers.

City officials from the Religious Affairs Department raided a Bible class held by the registered Greater Grace Protestant Church in a member's home in Ashgabat on April 11, 2008. The church's pastor, Vladimir Tolmachev, was told that his church could lose its official registration if it continues to conduct religious instruction for its members without CRA approval.

According to Forum 18, police raided a Baptist service on December 29, 2007, in a private home in Balkanabat. Police and unidentified individuals in civilian clothes took down the attendees' names and confiscated religious literature, hymn books, a Bible concordance and 47 compact discs with recordings of sermons and hymns. Three individuals who organized the service were briefly detained and then released.

On April 29, 2007, an unidentified official--possibly from the Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs--demanded and then fled with the travel documents of three members of an unregistered Mary-based group who were traveling by train to Dashoguz Province to meet with a religious leader. A transportation official, finding the three group members without documents, returned them by train to Ashgabat the same day.

On April 19, 2007, officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Sixth Department raided a branch of the registered Evangelical Baptist Church of Turkmenistan in Turkmenbashi. The authorities came to a worship service and took Bibles and hymnals from the congregation. That evening, police summoned two women to a local official's office and fined them approximately \$90 (2.5 million manat), threatening further harassment if the women did not pay. The police gave no specific reason for the harassment but suggested that the women ought to be attending a Russian Orthodox Church.

In early 2007 law enforcement officials reportedly raided a meeting of the registered group Svet Vostoka (Light of the East) Pentecostal church in Dashoguz.

On March 18, 2007, authorities raided a meeting of an unregistered religious group in Abadan and fined the home owners.

On February 4, 2007, a group of law enforcement officers, who refused to show identification or a search warrant, raided the private house of the leader of an unregistered Christian group, where a wide circle of relatives and family friends were gathered. The inhabitants of the house were not conducting any religious activities. For five hours, the group of officers videotaped the persons and belongings inside the house.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported numerous cases of harassment, detention, and abuse and did not seek registration during the period covered by this report. They reported in April 2008 that government officials told them that they would never acquire registration even if they applied for it. In the previous reporting period, tensions with the Government had been high, and representatives cited seven specific cases of harassment that occurred in March and April 2007, including two in which members lost their jobs.

On April 17, 2007, Dashoguz police, according to their own report, took a Bible and religious literature from the room of Jehovah's Witness member Rinat Babajanov and took him to the city hall, where he was fined \$55 (1.25 million manat). On April 13, 2007, three officers forcibly took ethnic Turkmen member Muhammed Annayev from his home in Ashgabat and questioned him about his religious beliefs, asking why he did not adhere to the Muslim faith.

On April 11, 2007, in Turkmenabat, two police officers entered an apartment shared by three Jehovah's

Witnesses, searched the apartment in the residents' absence, and took their passports. All three Jehovah's Witnesses were detained for several hours and one, a woman, was sexually molested by the police officers. Upon appeal, the prosecutor initially declared the passport seizure illegal but then threatened to fine the Jehovah's Witnesses after talking to the police. On April 9, 2007, Jehovah's Witness Anna Karayeva was called to the Ashgabat city hall, where five persons questioned her for 2 hours about her religious beliefs and fined her \$55 (1.25 million manat), which she refused to pay. Following this incident, Karayeva lost her job, reportedly on the orders of the MNB.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on April 2, 2007, police officers in Ashgabat interrupted their holiday celebration. They took several members to the police station and demanded that they write an explanation in front of police, representatives of the local mayor's office, and representatives of the CRA and MNB. Also on April 2, 2007, in Turkmenabat, eight police officers and eight officials in civilian clothing raided the apartment of Jehovah's Witness Maral Jorayeva during a holiday celebration involving nine adults and six children. The officials took Bibles, religious literature, and passports from Jorayeva and threatened her.

On March 17, 2007, two police officers entered the Ashgabat home of Jehovah's Witnesses Mahrigozel Saparova and Vitali Hojayeov without a proper warrant. A regional court fined the couple approximately \$55 (1.25 million manat) for violating several articles of Turkmenistan's law, and Saparova--a doctor--lost her job shortly afterwards.

On October 28, 2006, Ashgabat police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses, Andrey Pomerantsev and his spouse, Orungul Umirova, for proselytizing. They were held at a temporary detention facility in Ashgabat for two days during an extended national holiday without any proceedings, but were released unharmed after the case was brought to the notice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported several similar cases of harassment, in which Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, searched, fined, and occasionally beaten during previous reporting periods as well.

A Hare Krishna representative reported that harassment from officials had decreased since her group's registration; there were no reports of authorities beating Hare Krishnas during this reporting period. In October 2006, as part of a general annual prison amnesty, former President Niyazov released imprisoned Hare Krishna follower Ceper Annaniyazova, who had been sentenced to 7 years in prison in November 2005 for having illegally crossed the border in 2002.

No religious buildings were destroyed by the Government during the reporting period, but no efforts were made to compensate communities for buildings destroyed during the Niyazov era. One mosque in Turkmenbashi was destroyed in 2006.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

During this reporting period, the Government registered one minority Christian group, the Source of Life Church in Turkmenabat, in late 2007, as well as a Muslim group from Ahal. Registered minority religious groups generally continued to report lower levels of harassment.

The Government did not destroy any mosques during the reporting period and began construction of large mosques in each of the provincial capitals, as well as smaller mosques in a number of villages and towns.

In August 2007 President Berdimuhamedov and other Turkmen officials met with members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The USCIRF delegation also met with the CRA and with leaders of minority religious groups.

The Government allowed some religious groups to host foreign visitors for the first time. In April 2008 the Seventh Day Adventists were able to host a foreign visitor, and the Catholic Church hosted a regional retreat in the country for officials from four CIS states and Turkey in March 2008. ROC Metropolitan Kyrill made an official visit to the country in May 2008.

In August 2007 a court granted exit permission to Merdan Shirmedov, a Protestant from an ethnic Turkmen fellowship in Dashoguz, to leave the country to join his pregnant wife, Wendy Lucas. Lucas stated that in April 2007 Shirmedov tried to cross the border to Uzbekistan but was prevented from leaving after Turkmenistani border guards found his name on a computerized exit blacklist. The court gave no explanation as to why Shirmedov was barred from leaving.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were no reports of general societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the period covered by this report. The Government, through the CRA, did little to promote interfaith understanding or dialogue beyond that between Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians. Government repression of minority religious groups did not reflect doctrinal or societal friction between the Muslim majority and minority religious groups. Rather, it reportedly reflected the Government's concern that the proliferation of nontraditional religious groups could undermine state control, promote civil unrest, facilitate undue influence by foreign interests, and destabilize the Government.

Many Muslims do not regularly attend mosques; however, the overwhelming majority of the population identify themselves as "Muslim," and national identity is linked to Islam. (Turkmen society considers an individual to be born into an ethnoreligious group.) Those who depart from these traditions receive little support or are criticized. Ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert from Islam to other religious groups are viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or incidents of harassment against the small Jewish community during the reporting period.

There is also a societal distrust of foreign-based religious groups and the belief that Islam from outside the country is "Wahhabist" or extremist.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom concerns with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and raises specific cases of detention or harassment with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CRA.

During the period covered by this report, U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. government officials raised cases of religious freedom abuse in meetings with government officials and urged greater support for religious freedom. In December 2007, a U.S. Department of State delegation met with senior CRA officials, MOJ officials, and minority religious leaders to discuss religious freedom concerns.

Embassy officers met regularly with the staff of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Center in Ashgabat, U.N. representatives, and other diplomatic missions in order to maximize cooperation in monitoring abuses of and promoting greater respect for religious freedom.

Embassy officers regularly met with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups to monitor their status, receive reports of abuse, and discuss measures to raise their cases with the Government. These representatives have been much more willing to meet with Embassy officials due to the reduced registration requirements and elimination of criminal penalties for religious activities.

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