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TURKMENISTAN

Harassment and imprisonment of religious believers

Introduction

The Central Asian state of Turkmenistan became independent following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then it has been dominated by President Saparmurad Niyazov, who has exercised a monopoly on power as both head of state and government. This monopoly was consolidated in December 1999 following flawed parliamentary elections and the subsequent passage later that month of a law making Saparmurad Niyazov President for life. Virtually no political activity was allowed in the run-up to these elections, and candidates for the 50-seat *Majlis* (parliament) were reportedly selected by President Niyazov - who has headed the governing Democratic Party (formerly the Communist Party of Turkmenistan) since 1985. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) decided not to deploy any election monitors, on the grounds that even the minimum level of pluralism for competitive elections was absent.

The government is extremely intolerant of dissent, restricting political and civil liberties and retaining tight control of the media. Known and perceived political opponents have been imprisoned, often amid allegations of torture. Others, including human rights defenders, have been forced into exile. Foreign human rights activists and journalists have been barred from Turkmenistan, or deported, making independent monitoring extremely difficult.

Amnesty International has reported regularly on such violations, including in its six-monthly bulletin *Concerns in Europe* (see for example the most recent edition, July to December 1999, AI Index: EUR 01/01/00). This short paper focuses on human rights violations experienced by some religious believers in the context of the clampdown on dissent in Turkmenistan. For example, law enforcement officials are said to have broken up peaceful religious meetings in private homes, fining participants or detaining them for short periods; confiscated religious material; physically and verbally abused religious believers; and imprisoned some solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion and conscience. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations to the authorities in Turkmenistan.

Position of religious believers

Most citizens of Turkmenistan are Moslems. Although the Constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion, some religious groups are subject to restrictions. One of the main problems is that of registration.

Under the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, religious congregations are required to register with the government and, once registered, are able to hold gatherings for worship, disseminate religious materials, and proselytize. Those not registered have reported obstacles and harassment in carrying out such activities. One of the problems unregistered religious groups have faced is that to obtain the necessary legal status they are required to have at least 500 Turkmen citizens over the age of 18 as adherents. Since re-registration of religious organizations was made compulsory in early 1997, this provision has meant that only two groups - the Russian Orthodox Church and the officially sanctioned Sunni Muslims - are currently legally registered.

Official harassment of non-sanctioned religious groups

Unregistered religious groups face official harassment when trying to exercise peacefully their right to freedom of religion, for example by attempting to hold services (even in private homes) or to distribute religious literature.¹ Last year, for example, there was a widespread crackdown on unregistered Protestant congregations. Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist and Pentecostal services were disrupted, congregations dispersed, religious material seized and pastors fined, and sometimes beaten. A Pentecostal pastor, Antonin Mokrusov, was said to have been fined the equivalent of two weeks' average wages after officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs raided a Sunday service of his unregistered church on 28 February 1999. Twenty-three adult participants were also briefly detained and had their passports confiscated. On 9 March 1999 Lydia Achilova and her husband Vitaly Tereshnev, a Baptist pastor in Dashkhovuz, northern Turkmenistan, were reportedly fined the equivalent of a month's wages for hosting unregistered religious meetings in their home. The only Seventh-Day Adventist church, in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat, was demolished in November that year, with one week's notice, after officials reportedly cited the need to build a road through the site. The congregation had been registered during the Soviet period, but was deprived of official status in 1997 following revisions to the law on religion requiring 500 members for registration.²

Similar pressure on Protestant congregations is said to be continuing at present. On 13 February 2000, for example, officers from the National Security Committee (KNB, the state security service) are again said to have burst into the home of Baptist

¹ See also for example the US Department of State 1999 Country Report on Human Rights Practices for Turkmenistan, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor on 25 February 2000, and the entry on Turkmenistan in the Human Rights Watch World Report 2000.

² See Flash News from Compass Direct, 16 November 1999.

pastor Vitaly Tereshnev and declared the religious meeting being held there as unlawful. He was fined and his passport was confiscated.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also said to have come under pressure. In September 1999, for example, local police and KNB officers are said to have detained two members of a Jehovah's Witness congregation in Geok-Tepe for discussing the Bible with fellow citizens. They were held for three days, reportedly beaten during this time, and then sentenced to 15 days' administrative detention.

Non-Christian groups are also reported to have faced similar problems. The Baha'i faith, for example, was deregistered in 1997 when it could not meet the requirement of 500 Turkmen adherents, and is said to have been prevented from conducting services since then. In June 1999 officials reportedly visited the Baha'i centre in Ashgabat, and warned its members not to distribute religious materials. A Buddhist group in the town of Mary, southeast of Ashgabat, was reportedly broken up by officials in August last year, and Hare Krishna devotees also reported a crackdown on their activities that month. The Hare Krishna community in Ashgabat was said to have been forced to dismantle their temple there on 12 August, and another of their temples was bulldozed in mid-August in the village of Budenovskiy, just outside the town of Mary. Hare Krishna devotees are said to have repeatedly sought registration with the authorities, but without success (in 1997 the Mary community reportedly collected the necessary signatures of 500 adherents, in line with the revised provision for registration, but the application was rejected as some of the signatories lived not in the town of Mary but in Mary region).³

Imprisonment of Baptists

Apart from the disruption of services, confiscation of material and physical destruction of places of worship, the official crackdown on non-sanctioned religious groups has included the detention of at least three Baptists, including two pastors, reportedly solely for their peaceful religious activity. They are Shagildy Atakov, Rahim Tashov, and Anatoly Belyayev.

The imprisonment of Shagildy Atakov

Shagildy Atakov, aged 37 and married with five children, is a member of the Baptist congregation in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk). He was arrested at his home there on 18 December 1998 by agents of the Criminal Investigation Department, and subsequently charged with "swindling" under Article 228 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan. The charge reportedly related to Shagildy

³ See Keston News Service of 8 and 22 September 1999.

Atakov's car business, which he ran before becoming a Christian. Supporters of Shagildy Atakov believe that the true reason for his arrest is his religious affiliation. Before his arrest, according to unofficial sources, Shagildy Atakov had been visited several times by state officials, among them an officer from the National Security Committee (KNB) on 10 November 1998, who threatened to charge him "on an old case" if he did not cease his participation in the Baptist church.

Shagildy Atakov first stood trial at Kopetdag District Court in Ashgabat on 19 March 1999. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in an ordinary-regime corrective labour camp (the least severe category), and additionally fined a sum equivalent to some \$12,000 (average wages are said to be around \$30 a month). The heavy fine reportedly related to the compensation the prosecutor believed Shagildy Atakov owed in view of the car he was alleged to have taken.

Following this verdict, however, a second trial was scheduled after the prosecution lodged a protest on the grounds that the sentence was too lenient. The retrial was initially set for 21 July 1999, but then postponed until the following month. During a brief meeting with his family in August 1999 following the re-trial, Shagildy Atakov said that he had not been able to attend the session set for July because he was recovering from systematic beatings while held in prison in the town of Mary, and was in very poor health (one of the officials involved is said to have ordered guards to take Shagildy Atakov back to his cell, rather than to trial, after seeing his appearance following the beatings). At one point Shagildy Atakov is said to have suffered from temporary loss of vision as a result of the beatings.

At the retrial, which took place on 4 and 5 August 1999, a court in Ashgabat raised Shagildy Atakov's sentence from two to four years' imprisonment, and imposed the same stiff fine.

Shagildy Atakov is serving his term in a corrective labour colony in the town Seydi in the northeast of Turkmenistan (Institution LV-K/12). At the end of November 1999 he was reportedly given a 15-day term in the camp's punishment cell for refusing to swear the prisoners' obligatory oath of loyalty to the President. At the time of writing Shagildy Atakov is said to be serving a one-month term in the camp's punishment block (known as a 'kartser' in Russian), although Amnesty International does not know the reason why this has been imposed.

Shagildy Atakov was not among the 7,000 prisoners granted early release or a reduced prison term by President Niyazov's amnesty of 7 January 2000.

Detention of Chariyar Atakov and harassment of Shagildy Atakov's family

State officials are also reported to have harassed Shagildy Atakov's family on religious grounds, placing his wife and children under "village arrest", giving one of his brothers a term of administrative detention, and forcing other relatives from their jobs.

In the morning of 3 February 2000 Shagildy Atakov's wife Artygul and their five children were detained by officers of the KNB and were forcibly taken from where they had been living in Mary to the village of Kaakhka, southwest of Ashgabat, where many of Shagildy Atakov's relatives live. The KNB were said to have acted after Artygul Atakova had refused to allow her children to bow before a portrait of President Niyazov at school.

Artygul and her children had been staying with the Baptist Shulgin family in Mary after Shagildy Atakov's arrest, and are said to have had legal registration there. The Shulgins were subsequently deported from Turkmenistan (see the section on deportations below).

Artygul Atakova is said to have protested to her children's school on 31 December 1999 about the requirement for all pupils to bow to the President's portrait. On 2 February this year she was summoned to the school about her complaint. When she returned home six KNB officers arrived, searched the Shulgins' flat and then took her

to the KNB offices. There Artygul Atakova is said to have been threatened that she would end up in prison like her husband if she did not renounce her religious activity.

At the time of writing Artygul and her children are said to be held under "village arrest" in Kaakhka, and are reportedly under tight surveillance. However, no formal criminal charges are yet believed to have been brought against her. Amnesty International is concerned that the family may be restricted in their movements in connection with their religious beliefs, and is seeking further information on such restrictions and any legal basis for this.

Officials are also reportedly harassing other relatives in order to put pressure on Shagildy Atakov and his immediate family. Some of his relatives, among them non-Baptists, are said to have been dismissed from their jobs and his brother Khoshgeldy Atakov was reportedly forced to resign from his job under pressure from the Security Service.

Chariyar Atakov, another of Shagildy Atakov's brothers, was detained in Kaakhka on 3 March 2000 and given a 15-day term of administrative detention. At the time of writing Amnesty International does not know the basis for this charge, although Chariyar Atakov, the father of two young sons, had been detained briefly last year in connection with his Baptist faith. On 17 April 1999 he and his companion Anatoly Belyayev, a Baptist pastor, were stopped at a police checkpoint on the Ashgabat-Dashkhovuz highway. They were questioned about their religious affiliation after Turkmen bibles were discovered in their car. The men were reportedly told that the Baptist faith was forbidden in Turkmenistan, and officials confiscated all their books and papers. The two men were detained and taken to KNB premises in Dashkhovuz, where according to reports Chariyar Atakov was severely beaten when he refused to give information about the Baptist church. Chariyar Atakov and Anatoly Belyayev were released the following day.⁴

In the first half of February 2000 a younger brother of Shagildy Atakov was found hanged. The circumstances of his death remain unclear. Reportedly, officers of the KNB arrived on the scene immediately.

Detention of Baptist pastor Rahim Tashov

Pastor Rahim Tashov, from the eastern town of Turkmenabad (formerly Chardzhu), was first detained last year on 24 October 1999, after KNB officers raided his church during a Sunday service. He was freed the following day, reportedly after being severely beaten.

After his release Rahim Tashov renewed an attempt to register his Baptist church with the authorities. He received no written response, but was reportedly told verbally that the authorities would never allow a Protestant church to be registered in Turkmenistan.⁵

⁴ See for example Keston News Service of 6 and 7 March 2000.

⁵ See Flash News from Compass Direct, 15 November 1999.

On 31 October the KNB in Turkmenabad again detained Rahim Tashov, and confiscated a computer and Christian literature from his home. He was held for 12 days at the city's investigation prison, then taken to the regional governor's office. There Rahim Tashov was reportedly given an administrative fine of one month's minimum wage under the law on unsanctioned meetings (Article 205 of the Administrative Code). He was also warned, prior to his release on 12 November, that he would face criminal charges and heavier penalties should he continue holding meetings of his unregistered congregation.

Arrest of Baptist pastor Anatoly Belyayev

Prior to his most recent arrest, Pastor Anatoly Belyayev had been detained briefly twice in 1999. As mentioned above, he was stopped with Shagildy Atakov's brother Chariyar in April 1999 while transporting religious literature. Anatoly Belyayev was detained again during the night of 16 to 17 December 1999, this time in Ashgabat, by KNB agents who were seeking another pastor, Vladimir Chernov. The agents allegedly failed to show any identification or arrest warrant, and told Anatoly Belyayev that he would be released when they had found Vladimir Chernov. During the night of 16 to 17 December, KNB agents are also said to have raided other congregations in Turkmenabad, Mary and Turkmenbashi, and to have confiscated the identity documents of some believers. Pastor Chernov was later detained and deported (see below) and Anatoly Belyayev was subsequently released.

Anatoly Belyayev was detained for the third time in the evening of 2 February 2000 by KNB officers at the home of his colleague, Mikhail Kozlov, in Ashgabat. Both men were taken to Kopetdag police station No. 2, where police confiscated Anatoly Belyayev's driving licence together with Mikhail Kozlov's car (later returned) and documents relating to it. Mikhail Kozlov was released the following day, but Anatoly Belyayev was transferred to a special holding centre in Sevastopol street in the Azatlyk district of Ashgabat. Anatoly Belyayev's wife, Natalya Belyayeva, was reportedly placed under house arrest, and both had their passports confiscated. At the time of his arrest members of the congregation feared that the authorities may have been trying to fabricate a case against Pastor Belyayev for an alleged traffic offence in Mikhail Kozlov's car.⁶

On 11 March Anatoly Belyayev was taken from prison to Ashgabat airport, where he was reunited with his wife and daughter just before the whole family was deported to Russia on a Moscow-bound flight.

Deportations

⁶ See for example Keston News Service of 14 February and 6 March 2000.

In cracking down on unregistered religious groups the authorities have often resorted to such deportations of those who do not hold Turkmen citizenship (even in instances when those concerned are said to have legal residency in Turkmenistan). On 17 August 1999, for example, Aleksandr Prinkur, an Uzbek citizen who had led the Hare Krishna community in Ashgabat since 1995, was deported from Turkmenistan. This was followed in December by the expulsion of Ramil Galimov, a member of a Jehovah's Witness group in Kizyl-Arvat who held dual Russian-Turkmen citizenship. The authorities are said to have held him for two weeks - without a warrant or formal charge - before forcibly deporting him (while retaining his Turkmen passport). He also reports that law enforcement officials beat him severely while he was in detention.

Such an approach with regard to deportations has also been taken with the Baptist community. On 16 December 1999 at around 11pm, for example, 15 agents of the KNB were said to have raided the home of Baptist pastor Vladimir Chernov in Ashgabat. Vladimir Chernov and his wife Olga, who were not in the house at the time, were arrested the following day on a train travelling from Ashgabat to Turkmenbashi. Vladimir Chernov was held for the following week in a police station and then, on 23 December, both were deported by plane to the Ukrainian capital of Kiev (Vladimir Chernov holds Ukrainian citizenship, but both he and his wife were said to have had the right to reside legally in Turkmenistan since 1993). Two days earlier Baptists Aleksandr Yefremov and his wife Vera Semina, who are Russian citizens, were deported by train to the Russian town of Saratov. They had been living in Turkmenabad.

On 10 March 2000, the day before Pastor Anatoly Belyayev and his family were deported, KNB agents also told the Senkin and Shulgin families that they faced expulsion. Both families had been active in the Baptist congregation in the town of Mary (Artygul Atakova and her five children were living with the Shulgins' at the time they were forcibly removed to the village of Kaakhka). The KNB in Mary had confiscated the Shulgins' passports on 22 December 1999, and those of the Senkin family in early January this year. Early on 13 March the KNB reportedly arrived at their homes, collected the families and put them on a train out of Turkmenistan.

Internal relocations

The authorities are also reported to be restricting freedom of movement within the country, by enforcing residence permits, for some religious activists who are citizens of Turkmenistan. Protestant pastor Shokhrat Piriyeu, for example, was reportedly told by KNB officials in March 2000 that his permit to live in Ashgabat was faulty, and that he would be sent back to his home town of Turkmenabad. Church sources in Ashgabat report that Shokhrat Piriyeu has permission to live in Ashgabat.

KNB officials are said to have raided Shokhrat Piriyeu's home on 7 March, seized private religious literature, confiscated his passport and taken him to a holding centre for those without proper documentation. He and his family were then about to be sent back by train to Turkmenabad, before they persuaded KNB officials to allow them to

remain while he sought to recover his passport. On 12 March the KNB raided the home of Shokhrat's brother Batyr Piriyeu, with whom the family were staying, and again confiscated religious literature. Shokhrat Piriyeu was required to report the next day to the KNB, and threatened again with being sent to the holding centre.

According to Keston News Service, Shokhrat Piriyeu had been publicly denounced last year by the Ashgabat newspaper *Adalat*, which on 24 September 1999 listed him among a number of religious minority leaders "involved in such criminal activities as illegal delivery and distribution of [imported religious books and videos] and conducting regular meetings in private flats". Shokhrat Piriyeu's car was confiscated during a raid on a Protestant house church in Bezmein near Ashgabat on 23 February this year.⁷

In March this year it was reported that a Muslim cleric who had maintained contacts with a US-funded radio station faced a sentence of internal exile. In an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen service, Mullah Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych had reportedly criticized an invitation by President Niyazov at the end of 1999 for children to celebrate the new year by dancing around a Christmas tree in Ashgabat and chanting a prayer to the President. Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych, 72, questioned any relationship between Islam and greeting the new year with a Christmas tree. He was arrested on 7 February and accused of "swindling" under Article 228 of the Criminal Code. Around a month later, on 3 March, Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych was said to have been among a group of prisoners taken to a session of the cabinet where he met President Niyazov. The cleric reportedly asked forgiveness, and President Niyazov replaced a possible prison term with internal exile in Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych's home region of Tedjen (although it appears that at that point Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych had not actually been tried and sentenced).⁸

Allegations of ill-treatment

Several religious activists have reported that while they were in custody law enforcement officials physically assaulted and verbally abused them (such as Rahim Tashov, Chariyar Atakov and Ramil Galimov, as described above). One young man was also reportedly beaten in December 1999 when 15 agents of the KNB raided the home of Baptist pastor Vladimir Chernov in Ashgabat. At that time the only person present was a 17-year-old caretaker named Dmitry Melnichenko, who reports that he was beaten and threatened with a false criminal charge after he refused to open the house,

⁷ See Keston News Service, 13 March 2000.

⁸ See for example Keston News Service of 22 February 2000 and RFE/RL's report of 13 March 2000: "Turkmenistan: Cleric facing internal exile over criticism".

which also serves as the Baptist Church, to them. He was also threatened in an attempt to make him collaborate, by passing on details of religious believers.

Dmitry Melnichenko described how 15 KNB agents had raided the house at around 11pm on 16 December and demanded the keys to the residential part. Dmitry Melnichenko refused, and was then reportedly beaten and kicked by the agents who also threatened to bring a prosecution against him, saying, "Now we'll collect up some things, spare parts for the car and other things, and we'll pin it on you". The KNB men took him to a local police station and again demanded the keys, beating him severely, including by banging his head against the wall, when he refused. The KNB then took Dmitry Melnichenko back to the house, where they broke in themselves to check whether pastor Vladimir Chernov was home. On their way back to the police station at around 1am, still with Dmitry Melnichenko in custody, the KNB agents called at the home of another Baptist pastor, Anatoly Belyayev, and detained him, reportedly without explanation (see the account of Anatoly Belyayev's arrest above). At the police station Dmitry Melnichenko reports that he was again beaten, and that the KNB threatened to put him into a cell with criminal prisoners who would "commit an outrage" on him. He was held overnight, and the following day was pressured through threats to collaborate by reporting on religious believers and giving their names and addresses (KNB agents were alleged to have told him that when he reached 18, the age for call up to compulsory military service, he would be "repaid for his faith in Jesus"). Dmitry Melnichenko refused, and was released around 6.30pm that day following insistent representations by his mother.

Conscientious objectors to military service

Another area where conscience has clashed with state in Turkmenistan is over the issue of military service, which is compulsory.⁹ There is no civilian alternative for young men whose conscientiously-held beliefs preclude them from carrying out compulsory military service, and those who refuse conscription face imprisonment under criminal law. Amnesty International has received information on several young men sent to prison on these grounds in recent years, and at least three are reported still to be imprisoned at the time of writing. They include one young man serving his second term for continuing to refuse his call-up papers. All have been Jehovah's Witnesses, whose religious beliefs do not permit them to bear arms for a secular power or to swear oaths (including that of allegiance required of army conscripts in Turkmenistan).

⁹ Article 38 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan states that military service is the obligation of male citizens.

International law and conscientious objection

The right to conscientious objection is a basic component of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Constitution of Turkmenistan guarantees this right,¹⁰ which is also articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (to which Turkmenistan is a state party). It has been recognized as such in resolutions and recommendations adopted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Committee.¹¹ These bodies have urged governments to guarantee that individuals objecting to compulsory military service because of their conscientiously held beliefs are given the opportunity to perform an alternative service. They have stated explicitly in a number of resolutions that this alternative service should be of a genuinely civilian character and of a length which cannot be considered as punitive. They have also recommended that individuals be permitted to register as conscientious objectors at any point in time before their conscription, after call-up papers have been issued, or during military service. Similarly, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has emphasized that information about how to seek recognition as a conscientious objector should be readily available to all those facing conscription into the armed forces - as well as to those already conscripted.

In November 1997, both the Council of Europe and the European Union reminded participating states in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - including Turkmenistan - at the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw that recognition of the right to conscientious objection to military service is an important part of the Organization's commitment to upholding freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all people living in the OSCE region.

Conscientious objectors as prisoners of conscience

Based on such international standards, Amnesty International considers a conscientious objector to be any person liable to conscription for military service who refuses to perform armed service for reasons of conscience or profound conviction. Their profound conviction may arise from religious, ethical, moral, humanitarian, philosophical, political or similar motives. But regardless of the conscientious base to their objection, the right of such individuals to refuse to carry weapons or to participate in wars or armed conflicts

¹⁰ Article 26 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan states: "Citizens of Turkmenistan have the right to freedom of conviction and the free expression of those convictions."

¹¹ For further information on the issue of conscientious objection in general see *Out of the margins: The right to conscientious objection to military service in Europe*, AI Index: EUR 01/02/97, April 1997.

should be guaranteed. This right also extends to those individuals who have already been conscripted into military service, as well as to soldiers serving in professional armies who have developed a conscientious objection after joining the armed forces. Wherever such a person is detained or imprisoned solely because they have been refused their right to register a conscientious objection or to perform a genuinely alternative service, Amnesty International will adopt that person as a prisoner of conscience.

Amnesty International does not question the right of governments to conscript individuals into the armed forces, nor does it agree or disagree with the motives of individual conscientious objectors. In keeping with the international standards mentioned above, however, Amnesty International insists that all those liable to conscription are given the opportunity to perform an alternative to armed service on the grounds of their conscience or profound conviction. On this basis, Amnesty International campaigns for the development of law and procedure which make adequate provision for conscientious objectors, and for the release of all those imprisoned solely on those grounds.

To this end Amnesty International is urging the relevant authorities in Turkmenistan to take all appropriate steps to introduce without delay the necessary legislation guaranteeing conscientious objectors their fundamental rights, and to ensure that no one is imprisoned solely for exercising their right to conscientious objection, in violation of international standards to which Turkmenistan is a party.

Prisoners of conscience Kurban Zakirov, Nuryagdy Gairov and Igor Nazarov

Four adherents named Rustam Seidkuliyeu, Roman Sidelnikov, Oleg Voronin and Roman Karimov are reported to have been among Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced in recent years for refusing their call-up papers. They are now said to have been released, but at the time of writing at least three other Jehovah's Witnesses are reported still to be imprisoned.¹² They are named by adherents in Turkmenistan as Kurban Zakirov, Nuryagdy Gairov and Igor Nazarov.

Kurban Bagdatovich Zakirov, born in 1980, was brought up in a children's home, and is from the city of Turkmenabad (formerly Chardzhu) near the Uzbek border. Kurban Zakirov became a Jehovah's Witness in June 1997. He was first said to have been detained in January 1999, picked up by police while attending a Bible discussion meeting at a friend's house in Turkmenabad. He was reportedly held for 30 days for taking part in an illegal religious meeting. Following his release Kurban Zakirov was called to the Military Commissariat where he stated his conscientious objection to

¹² Rustam Seidkuliyeu, Roman Karimov and Roman Sidelnikov are all said to have been sentenced twice for refusing military service on conscientious grounds. In January 1999 a Czech lawyer retained to defend Roman Karimov tried to attend his client's appeal hearing, but reported that he was held for 14 hours at Ashgabat airport and then deported without explanation.

compulsory military service. He was immediately charged under Article 219 of the Turkmen Criminal Code for “evading regular call-up to compulsory military service” and placed in pre-trial detention. On 23 April 1999 a court sentenced Kurban Zakirov to two years’ imprisonment, which he is serving in a corrective labour colony in Bezmein. Kurban Zakirov is said to have applied for release under an amnesty, but was denied this as he refuses to swear a daily oath of loyalty to President Niyazov.

Less information is available on the other two men currently imprisoned. Nuryadgy Gairov was said to have been sentenced to one year’s imprisonment for his conscientious objection to military service on 19 January this year. He is serving his term in a corrective labour colony in Tedzhen. Like Kurban Zakirov, Nuryadgy Gairov was also reportedly refused release under an amnesty for refusing to swear the oath of allegiance to President Niyazov.

Also in the Tedzhen camp is Igor Nazarov, who is serving his second sentence, imposed on 14 March this year, for refusing his call-up papers. At present Amnesty International does not know the length of this current term. Igor Nazarov had previously been sentenced to a two-year term on 8 June 1996 by Kopetdag District Court. The sentence was suspended on condition that he perform compulsory labour, which he carried out for six months at special commandant’s office No. 1 in the city of Bezmein.

Amnesty International’s recommendations

In the light of persistent reports of human rights violations experienced by some religious believers, Amnesty International is urging the Government of Turkmenistan to:

- ◆ release immediately and unconditionally anyone detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion, and refrain from imprisoning anyone else on these grounds;
- ◆ ensure that everyone in Turkmenistan is able to exercise peacefully their right to freedom of religion without the threat of detention or imprisonment;
- ◆ ensure that all allegations of torture or ill-treatment by law enforcement officials are investigated promptly and impartially, with the results made public and - if the allegations are substantiated - with those responsible brought to justice in the courts;
- ◆ release immediately and unconditionally all those imprisoned for their refusal on conscientious grounds to perform military service, and refrain from imprisoning anyone else as a conscientious objector;

- ◆ introduce without delay legislative provisions to ensure that a civilian alternative of non-punitive length is available to all those whose religious, ethical, moral, humanitarian, philosophical, political or other conscientiously-held beliefs preclude them from performing military service;
- ◆ establish independent and impartial decision-making procedures for applying a civilian alternative to military service;
- ◆ ensure, after the introduction of a civilian alternative service, that all relevant persons affected by military service, including those already serving in the army, have information available to them about the right to conscientious objection and how to apply for an alternative service.