

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

For Immediate Release

July 3, 2007

Turkmenistan resumes prosecution of conscientious objectors

ASHGABAT, TURKMENISTAN—After two years of relative peace, Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan face a recurring obstacle. On June 14, 2007, two young Jehovah's Witnesses, Nuryagdy Gayyrov and Bayram Ashirgeldyyev, were taken into custody because of their conscientious objection to military service. The investigator stated that they are charged with evading military service in violation of Article 219 (part 1) of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan and that their cases are being prepared for court.

Gayyrov already served a prison sentence for his conscientious objection seven years ago, when he was just 19 years old. He was detained on December 16, 1999, and on January 19, 2000, was sentenced to one year in prison. Although he was granted amnesty on April 14, 2000, he was not released because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to the president. After 15 days of severe punishment in an isolation cell, where he was beaten to unconsciousness several times by national security officers, he was returned to the colony until his release on November 11, 2000. Indicting a person, in this case a conscientious objector, a second time for the same offense after he has already served a prison term for that offense violates all norms of legal standards and international human rights.

For 20-year old Ashirgeldyyev, this is the first time he is being indicted.

Currently, both Gayyrov and Ashirgeldyyev are being held in a preliminary pretrial detention unit in Ashgabat. Reportedly, the place is very crowded with 20-30 persons sharing a cell. Between the overcrowding, the sweltering daytime heat, and the lack of adequate ventilation, the conditions in the detention unit are deplorable.

Gayyrov and Ashirgeldyyev are deprived of any legal support or access to the outside world. Even their family members have not been allowed to visit them. Gayyrov's older brother—who is not one of Jehovah's Witnesses—has been called in for interrogation by the 6th Police Department, which handles organized crime and terrorism. The authorities appear to be using harassment of family members as another means to pressure the young men to serve in the military.

Gayyrov and Ashirgeldyyev are the first Jehovah's Witnesses to face indictment on charges of conscientious objection since April 16, 2005, when the last remaining Witness prisoners were released under a special amnesty issued by Turkmenistan's former president.



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