

Table of Contents

- ***Tenth jailed conscientious objector in 2018***
 - ***Imprisoned for their faith***
 - ***Now eight jailed conscientious objectors***
 - ***Three more conscientious objectors jailed***
 - ***Appeals against 12-year jail terms fail***
 - ***Last-ditch appeal against 12-year jail terms***
 - ***Jailings of conscientious objectors resume***
-

Tenth jailed conscientious objector in 2018

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (21.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2DqgL4w> - Turkmenistan rejected a call at the UN Human Rights Council UPR to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service. The rejection came weeks after another conscientious objector, 18-year-old Serdar Atayev, was jailed for one year. Ten are known to have been jailed in 2018.

The jailing of 18-year-old Serdar Atayev brings to ten the number of conscientious objectors known to have been jailed in Turkmenistan in 2018 for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. He is among four conscientious objectors known to have been jailed in August.

On 20 September, a Turkmen diplomat reaffirmed to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva that his government rejected a call in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the country to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. Turkmenistan also rejected a UPR call for independent visits to prisons, including those where Muslim and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are being held (see below).

A court in the south-eastern city of Mary handed Jehovah's Witness Atayev a one-year ordinary regime labour camp term on 28 August. Both he and another Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector jailed by the same court the day before are awaiting their appeal hearings in a local detention centre (see below).

Two other conscientious objectors sentenced in other regions earlier in August lost their appeals on 11 September. This cleared the way for their transfer to labour camp to serve their sentences (see below).

All ten of the conscientious objectors known to be serving prison terms in Turkmenistan for refusing compulsory military service are Jehovah's Witnesses. The youngest are aged

18 and the oldest 24. Nine – including Atayev - are serving one-year jail terms and the tenth a two-year sentence (see list at foot of article).

Atayev was the fourth conscientious objector jailed in August.

Of the other six conscientious objectors sentenced earlier, two were jailed in January, one in June and three in July.

Many prisoners of conscience

The ten jailed conscientious objectors are among the many people Turkmenistan has jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Five Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court on 11 July. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

Dozens of Muslims from in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] were imprisoned in 2013 and after to punish them for their involvement in a Muslim study group. Most or all the prisoners are believed to be held in Ovadan-Depe. Relatives often have no information as to whether they are still alive. Three of the group are known to have died in prison.

Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov is serving a four-year jail term to punish him for hosting a religious meeting (see below).

Government rejects alternative service call at UN

During the review of Turkmenistan by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva in May, other governments presented 191 recommendations of how the country could improve its human rights record (A/HRC/39/3).

Argentina recommended: "Adopt the necessary measures in order to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service." However, this was among the 19 recommendations the Turkmen government rejected.

The Turkmen government rejected the call to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service in its written response to the UPR (A/HRC/39/3/Add.1), made public by the UN on 13 September. It repeated its rejection at a meeting of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 20 September.

"We refer to Article 58 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan which provides that the protection of Turkmenistan is a sacred duty of every citizen," Ahmetyar Kulov, First

Secretary at Turkmenistan's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, told the meeting. "Under the Constitution, military service is compulsory for all male citizens."

Another UPR recommendation given in May was: "Provide those who are imprisoned, including in the Ovadan-Depe and Seydi prisons, access to independent inspectors and other visitors and permit those visitors to conduct private and fully confidential interviews with prisoners, consistent with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners."

The Turkmenistan government's written response also rejected this recommendation, with no explanation.

Many Muslim prisoners of conscience are held at Ovadan-Depe prison (see above), while at least seven jailed Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are being held at Seydi Labour Camp (see below).

No answers

Forum 18 again tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament, to find out why young men are being jailed for refusing military service on grounds of conscience and why Turkmenistan rejected the call in the UPR to introduce an alternative to military service. Her phones went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 20 and 21 September.

Forum 18 also tried to call Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, to find out if the authorities will ever introduce a law to allow those with conscientious objections to compulsory military service to perform an alternative civilian service. However, his phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 20 and 21 September.

No conscientious objection, no alternative service

In defiance of repeated calls by the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. Call-up is decreed each spring and autumn.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. However, jailings resumed with the two prison terms in January 2018.

Another one-year jail term

Jehovah's Witness Serdar Atayev, who turned 18 in June, was called up to compulsory military service in the south-eastern city of Mary. He told the Conscription Office that he could not perform military service on grounds of conscience.

The Conscription Office handed Atayev's case to prosecutors, who brought a case against him under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The case was handed to Mary City Court.

On 28 August, Judge Guljan Babanazarova of Mary City Court found Atayev guilty and sentenced him to one year's ordinary regime labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. As he had not been in detention in the run-up to the trial, Atayev was arrested at the end of the trial and led away to the city's detention centre.

Judge Babanazarova's assistant refused to put Forum 18 through to her on 20 September or discuss any aspect of the case.

Atayev filed an appeal against his sentence on 31 August. No date for the appeal to be heard at Mary Regional Court has yet been set.

Atayev is currently being held in Mary's detention centre, MR-D/14, until his appeal is heard.

Two appeals pending

Atayev was jailed one day after the same Mary City Court jailed another 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector, Sokhbet Agamyradov, also for one year.

Agamyradov also filed an appeal against his sentence on 31 August. No date for his appeal to be heard at Mary Regional Court has yet been set either.

Like Atayev, Agamyradov is currently being held in Mary's detention centre, MR-D/14, until his appeal is heard.

An official of Mary Regional Court said that neither Atayev's nor Agamyradov's appeals have yet arrived from Mary City Court. "The appeals are held for a month at the lower court before they are brought over," the official told Forum 18 on 20 September. "So they will arrive after 27 and 28 September and hearings will be set then."

Two appeals fail

Two of the other conscientious objectors sentenced earlier in August - Isa Sayayev from the northern Dashoguz Region and Ruslan Artykmuradov from the eastern Lebap Region – lost their appeals at Regional Courts.

Koneurgench City Court sentenced Sayayev to a one-year ordinary regime labour camp

term on 9 August. Dashoguz Regional Court rejected his appeal on 11 September, Koneurgench City Court told Forum 18 on 20 September.

Sayat District Court sentenced Artykmuradov to a one-year ordinary regime labour camp term on 13 August. Lebap Regional Court rejected his appeal on 11 September, the Court told Forum 18 on 20 September.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out if Sayayev and Artykmuradov have already been transferred to labour camp to serve their sentences. Sayayev had been held in the DZ-D/7 detention centre in the city of Dashoguz. Artykmuradov had been held in the LB-D/9 detention centre in the city of Turkmenabad.

Six jailed conscientious objectors in one labour camp

The four conscientious objectors jailed in August are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at the ordinary regime labour camp LB-K/12 in the desert near Seydi, in Lebap Region. Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp.

The six conscientious objectors sentenced between January and July - Arslan Begenchov, Kerven Kakabayev, Mekan Annayev, Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev and Maksat Jumadurdiyev – are already serving their sentences at the Seydi camp.

Also held at Seydi Labour Camp is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov. He was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat

Seydi

uchr. LB-K/12

Turkmenistan

List of known jailed conscientious objectors

Ten conscientious objectors to compulsory military service (listed below) – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are known to be serving prison sentences under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1:

1) Arslan Begenchovich Begenchov; born 15 May 1999; sentenced 17 January 2018 Charjew District Court; appeal rejected 13 February 2018 Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

2) Kerven Arslanovich Kakabayev; born 9 September 1996; sentenced 29 January 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal denied due to missed appeal deadline 27 June 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

3) Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev; born 22 June 1999; sentenced 26 June 2018 Turkmenbashi City Court; no appeal to Balkan Region Court; two year ordinary regime labour camp.

4) Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov; born 26 November 1997; sentenced 11 July 2018 Gurbansoltan eje District Court; appeal rejected 23 July 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

5) Veniamin Muslimovich Genjiyev; born 12 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

6) Maksat Jumadurdiyevich Jumadurdiyev; born 15 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

7) Isa Muslimovich Sayayev; born 14 May 1994; sentenced 9 August 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal rejected 11 September 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

8) Ruslan Khadynyaz oglu Artykmuradov; born 24 May 2000; sentenced 13 August 2018 Sayat District Court; appeal rejected 11 September 2018 Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

9) Sokhbet Rejepmyradovich Agamyradov; born 4 January 2000; sentenced 27 August 2018 Mary City Court; appeal lodged to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

10) Serdar Annamyradovich Atayev; born 9 June 2000; sentenced 28 August 2018 Mary City Court; appeal lodged to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

Imprisoned for their faith

JW Headquarters (01.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2hE9xin> - From June through August 2018, Turkmenistan authorities imprisoned seven of Jehovah's Witnesses who are

conscientious objectors to military service. Ihlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev, Maksat Jumadurdyev, Isa Sayayev, Ruslan Artykmuradov, and Sokhbet Agamyradov were sentenced to one year in prison, and Mekan Annayev was sentenced to two years.

These seven young men are the latest Witnesses to be imprisoned in Turkmenistan for conscientious objection. In January 2018, authorities convicted two others, Arslan Begenjov and Kerven Kakabayev, for refusing military service and sentenced each to one year in prison. *They were the first Witness men to have been imprisoned on this issue since February 2015. Both men, as well as four of the seven who were just convicted, are in the Seydi prison (LBK-12), where Bahram Hemdemov has been incarcerated for over three years.

Unjust imprisonment of Bahram Hemdemov

On March 14, 2015, police in Turkmenabad raided a peaceful religious meeting held in Bahram Hemdemov's private home. Thirty-eight Witnesses were arrested and charged with illegal religious activity. All were mistreated, 30 were fined, and 8 were sentenced to 15-day jail terms. The Lebap Regional Court later sentenced Mr. Hemdemov to four years in prison, and his health has suffered as a result of the infamously bad conditions within the Seydi prison. Until now, he has been overlooked in the amnesties that the president grants several times a year.

Respect for freedom of conscience, religion, and belief still at issue

In 2015 and 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) released ten favorable decisions on complaints submitted by Witness men who had been imprisoned in harsh conditions as conscientious objectors to military service. At present, the Witnesses have seven other complaints against Turkmenistan pending with the CCPR.

In an April 2012 report, the CCPR exhorted the government of Turkmenistan to "ensure that its laws and practices relating to the registration of religious organizations respect the rights of persons to freely practice and manifest their religious beliefs as provided for under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]." The Witnesses applied for registration in 2008, but the government has not acknowledged their application.

Prospects for improvement?

Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful that the government of Turkmenistan has previously freed prisoners to correct injustices. * With these latest convictions, however, Turkmenistan is again ignoring international calls to respect the rights of conscientious objectors. The Witnesses look for a positive response from the government to the CCPR rulings—greater respect for human rights in general and specifically for the right to freedom of conscience, religion, and belief.

Prisoner of conscience profile



Bahram Hemdemov

Mr. Hemdemov, 54 years old, is married and the father of four sons. At the time of his arrest, he served his congregation as an elder and was a well-respected member of the community. In May 2015 a court sentenced him to four years of hard labor in prison for holding an “illegal” religious meeting in his home. He is detained in a notoriously wretched labor camp in the town of Seydi, where he has suffered repeated interrogations and brutal beatings at the hands of the authorities. However, he has maintained his conscientious stand despite the mistreatment. Mr. Hemdemov’s wife, Gulzira, has been able to visit him periodically.

Now eight jailed conscientious objectors

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (16.08.2018) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2405 - With two jailings in August, eight conscientious objectors aged 18 to 24 are now serving labour camp terms of one to two years. Forum 18 could not reach Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova to ask why young men are jailed for refusing military service on grounds of conscience.

Two more conscientious objectors were jailed in August for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. The two young men – both Jehovah's Witnesses – were each given one-year ordinary regime labour camp terms.

The jailing of Isa Sayayev and Ruslan Artykmuradov brings to eight the number of conscientious objectors known to be serving prison terms in Turkmenistan for refusing compulsory military service. The youngest three are aged 18 and the oldest 24. Seven – including the two new prisoners - are serving one-year jail terms and the eighth a two-year sentence (see list at foot of article).

In addition to the two August jailings, two conscientious objectors were jailed in January, one in June and three in July (see F18News 30 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400).

Forum 18 again tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament, to find out

why young men are being jailed for refusing military service on grounds of conscience. However, her assistant told Forum 18 on 15 August that she was on a work trip to Dashoguz Region and would not be back in the office until 17 August. Her mobile phone went unanswered on 15 and 16 August.

No conscientious objection, no alternative service

In defiance of repeated calls by the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years (see F18News 30 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400).

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. However, jailings resumed with the two prison terms in January 2018 (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Dashoguz Region: Another one year jail term

After Isa Sayayev refused military service on grounds of conscience, Prosecutors in Dashoguz Region brought a case against the 24-year-old Jehovah's Witness under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1.

On 9 August, a judge at Koneurgench City Court found Sayayev guilty and jailed him for one year in an ordinary regime labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Sayayev had not been under arrest in the run-up to the trial. He was arrested in the court room after the verdict was handed down. He was taken to the DZ-D/7 detention centre in the city of Dashoguz.

On 13 August, Sayayev lodged an appeal against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court.

Lebap Region: Another one year jail term

After Ruslan Artykmuradov refused military service on grounds of conscience, Prosecutors in Lebap Region brought a case against the 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1.

On 13 August, a judge at Sayat District Court found Artykmuradov guilty and jailed him for one year in an ordinary regime labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Artykmuradov had not been under arrest in the run-up to the trial. He was arrested in the court room after the verdict was handed down. He was taken to the LB-D/9 detention centre in the city of Turkmenabad.

Artykmuradov is preparing an appeal against his conviction to Lebap Regional Court.

Six jailed conscientious objectors in one labour camp

If they lose their appeals, Sayayev and Artykmuradov are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at the ordinary regime labour camp LB-K/12 in the desert near Seydi, in Lebap Region. Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp.

The six conscientious objectors sentenced between January and July - Arslan Begenchov, Kerven Kakabayev, Mekan Annayev, Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev and Maksat Jumadurdiyev – are already serving their sentences at the Seydi camp.

Also held at Seydi Labour Camp is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov. He was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is: 746222 Lebap velayat, Seydi, uchr. LB-K/12, Turkmenistan

List of known jailed conscientious objectors

Eight conscientious objectors to compulsory military service (listed below) – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are known to be serving prison sentences under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1:

1) Arslan Begenchovich Begenchov; born 15 May 1999; sentenced 17 January 2018 Charjew District Court; appeal rejected 13 February 2018 Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

2) Kerven Arslanovich Kakabayev; born 9 September 1996; sentenced 29 January 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal denied due to missed appeal deadline 27 June 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

3) Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev; born 22 June 1999; sentenced 26 June 2018 Turkmenbashi City Court; no appeal to Balkan Region Court; two year ordinary regime labour camp.

4) Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov; born 26 November 1997; sentenced 11 July 2018 Gurbansoltan eje District Court; appeal rejected 23 July 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

5) Veniamin Muslimovich Genjiyev; born 12 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

6) Maksat Jumadurdiyevich Jumadurdiyev; born 15 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

7) Isa Muslimovich Sayayev; born 14 May 1994; sentenced 9 August 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal lodged to Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

8) Ruslan Khadynyaz oglu Artykmuradov; born 24 May 2000; sentenced 13 August 2018 Sayat District Court; appeal in preparation to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

Three more conscientious objectors jailed

By Felix Corley

Three Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in July for one year each for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. They are among at least five conscientious objectors jailed so far in 2018, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. Prosecutor's Offices are still investigating others.

Forum18 (30.07.2018) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400 - Three more Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were jailed in July to punish them for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Each received a one year term in an ordinary regime labour camp.

Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev and Maksat Jumadurdiyev are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at Seydi Labour Camp, where three other Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are already being held (see below).

Their jailing brings to at least five the number of conscientious objectors jailed in Turkmenistan for refusing military service. The other two imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors - Arslan Begenchov and Kerven Kakabayev, both in Seydi Labour Camp - were jailed in January for one year each. Another Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience, Bahram Hemdemov, is also imprisoned (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that, despite repeated prisoner amnesties (including in March and June 2018) that have seen even murderers freed, Begenchov, Kakabayev and Hemdemov have not been freed under amnesty.

Prosecutor's Offices are also investigating other Jehovah's Witness young men who have refused to perform military service on grounds of religious conscience, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Forum 18 tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament. Her assistant – who did not give his name - told Forum 18 on 27 July that she was on a work trip and would be back at her desk on 30 July. However, each time Forum 18 called on 30 July her phone went unanswered.

Many Muslim prisoners of conscience

In addition to the six known Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, dozens of Muslims have been jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief. In many cases, relatives do not know if they are alive or dead (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

On 11 July, the Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] upheld the 12-year jail terms handed down in Balkan Region in August 2017 to punish five Muslims who met with others to study their faith using the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.

Four of the five are believed to be in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect (see F18News 27 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399).

No conscientious objection, no alternative service

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defence as a "sacred duty" of everyone and states that military service is compulsory for men. Turkmenistan ignored the recommendation of a July 2016 legal review of the draft Constitution by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation that it should include a provision for alternative, civilian service (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of religious conscience face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

In March 2017, at the end of its review of Turkmenistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee again called on the authorities to end punishments for those unable to perform military service on grounds of conscience and introduce an alternative, civilian service (CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2).

"The State party should revise its legislation without undue delay with a view to clearly recognizing the right to conscientious objection to military service," the Committee declared, "provide for alternative service of a civilian nature outside the military sphere and not under military command for conscientious objectors, and halt all prosecutions of individuals who refuse to perform military service on grounds of conscience and release those who are currently serving prison sentences."

Officials refused to explain to Forum 18 why they did not implement the UN recommendation. With the two jailings in January 2018, less than a year after the UN report was issued, Turkmenistan began imprisoning conscientious objectors again after a break of four years (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Dashoguz Region: One-year sentence

On 11 July, Gurbansoltan eje District Court in the northern Dashoguz Region convicted 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness Ikhlosbek Rozmetov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp.

Rozmetov appealed against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court. However, it is not known if the appeal has yet been heard. Telephones at the court were inaccessible when Forum 18 tried to call on 30 July.

Rozmetov is currently being held in Dashoguz Regional Investigation Prison, DZ-D/7. If the Regional Court rejects his appeal, he will be sent to serve his sentence in an ordinary regime labour camp.

Lebap Region: Two one-year sentences

On 6 July, officers in Danew District in the eastern Lebap Region took 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness Veniamin Genjiyev into pre-trial detention, claiming that he had failed to appear at the Prosecutor's Office, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. However, neither Genjiyev nor his parents ever received an official summons to appear at the Prosecutor's Office and Genjiyev never signed any document limiting his movement. He challenged the pre-trial detention order.

On 17 July, Danew District Court convicted Genjiyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp. Genjiyev decided not to appeal against his conviction.

Also on 17 July, the same Danew District Court convicted 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness Maksat Jumadurdiyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp. Jumadurdiyev decided not to appeal against his conviction.

Both Genjiyev and Jumadurdiyev are being held in Lebap Regional Investigation Prison in the regional capital Turkmenabad, LB-D/9. As neither chose to appeal against their convictions they are expected to be transferred soon to an ordinary regime labour camp to serve their sentences.

Imminent transfer to Seydi Labour Camp?

Rozmetov, Genjiyev and Jumadurdiyev are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at the ordinary regime labour camp LB-K/12 in the desert near Seydi, in Lebap Region. Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp.

The other two imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors - Arslan Begenchov and Kerven Kakabayev – were sent there after their January convictions (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Also held at Seydi Labour Camp is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov. He was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat
Seydi
uchr. LB-K/12
Turkmenistan

Appeals against 12-year jail terms fail

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Five Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi have failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovdan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

Forum18 (27.07.2018) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399 - On 11 July, the Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] upheld the 12-year jail terms handed down in Balkan Region in August 2017 to punish five Muslims who met with others to study their faith using the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.

Four of the five are believed to be in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect (see below).

Meanwhile, a Turkmen citizen returning from working in Turkey told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service that he was held for two days on arrival at Ashgabad airport in mid-July after secret police border guards found out he prayed the namaz (Muslim prayers) regularly and had photos of mosques and himself at prayer on his mobile phone. Border guards accused him of being a terrorist (see below).

Turkmen citizens returning to the country from Turkey have long complained of intrusive questioning at Ashgabad airport about whether they pray and visit the mosque. Women working there or married to Turks particularly complained earlier in the year (see below).

Forum 18 tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament. Her assistant – who did not give his name - told Forum 18 on 27 July that she was on a work trip and would be back at her desk on 30 July.

Supreme Court appeal fails

Five Muslims jailed in August 2017 in Balkan Region of western Turkmenistan failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at the Supreme Court in Ashgabad on 11 July 2018. "Their appeals left the lower court decision unchanged," a court official who did not give their name told Forum 18.

Forum 18 was unable to find out if the five men were brought to the court from prison for the appeal hearing, nor whether they were represented by a lawyer.

The men could appeal further, this time to the chair of the Supreme Court for a supervisory appeal.

The five Muslims had met with others to pray and study their faith, using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The authorities arrested the five men in May and June 2017. On 15 August 2017, a panel of three judges at Balkan Regional Court in the regional capital Balkanabad sentenced the five men to 12-year jail terms in strict regime labour camps. The court ordered that religious literature, mobile phones and cash be seized from them (see F18News 10 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2393).

The five Muslims jailed were:

- 1) Jumanazar Yuldashowich Hojambetow, born 17 April 1981, ethnic Uzbek, single, unemployed, lived in Koneurgench and Balkanabad
- 2) Begejik Begejikow, born 23 January 1963, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in Balkanabad
- 3) Ahmet Bayramberdiyewich Mammedurdyyew, born 13 August 1978, ethnic Turkmen, married with 2 children, worked as guard at oil company, lived in Balkanabad
- 4) Meret Hydyrowich Owezow, born 16 February 1960, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in village of Gokje in Mary Region
- 5) Myratdurdy Shamyradow, born 7 May 1973, ethnic Turkmen, married, businessman, lived in Mollanepes in Mary Region

Harsh prison conditions

Despite the verdict that states that the five men were to serve their terms at a strict regime labour camp, four of the five men were transferred to the much harsher Ovadan-Depe prison.

The isolated top-security prison is located in the Karakum Desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. Other prisoners in Ovadan-Depe are known to have been tortured, and some have died from maltreatment or neglect. Relatives of other prisoners held there often have no information as to whether they are still alive (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2244).

The fifth prisoner – apparently a former police officer or other official – was sent to serve his sentence at the special labour camp for former law-enforcement officials at Akdash near Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) in Balkan Region (BL-K/4).

Forum 18 has been unable to establish which four prisoners of conscience were sent to Ovadan-Depe and which one to Akdash.

The address of Ovadan-Depe Prison is:

Ahal velayat
Upravlenie politsii Ahalskogo velayata
uchr. AH-T/2
Turkmenistan

Two-day airport detention

A Turkmen citizen who arrived back at Ashgabad airport on 10 July was questioned about his exercise of freedom of religion or belief while in Turkey and detained for two days, he told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service for a report published on 18 July, asking that his name not be given.

After finding out that he had been working in Turkey, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers then asked him whether he prayed the namaz. After he said he attended Friday prayers regularly, they asked him to hand over his mobile phone, which they began looking through. The officers found photos of mosques, prayer beads and the man praying.

"They started to ask me and intimidate me: 'What are you brother, a terrorist?'," the man told Radio Free Europe. "You must be bringing in weapons from abroad? What organisation are you in? Tell us the name of the organisation or we'll start to torture you," the man quoted the MSS secret police officers as having told him.

The man responded to the MSS secret police officers that he had no connection with any organisation or subversive group and the fact that he prayed the namaz regularly did not make him a terrorist. He then went on to complain that no action was taken against people who drink vodka, "but why do you harass people like me who pray the namaz?"

After the officers told him to stop complaining and to answer their questions, the man told them he was not afraid to be locked up for praying the namaz. MSS secret police officers held him at the airport for two days before allowing him home. During his detention, the man received calls from worried relatives asking where he was.

The man said he wanted Radio Free Europe to publish his story to warn other Turkmen

citizens who have been working abroad of the reception they could receive on arriving back at Ashgabad airport.

Forum 18 has been unable to verify independently the man's report. However, over many years security officials have questioned Turkmen citizens arriving at the airport (as well as at other border crossings) about whether they are religious, inspected and often seized religious literature or other items they might have and searched mobile phones for any religious content (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

"How often do you pray the namaz?"

Earlier in the year, Turkmen women with residence permits for Turkey (some of them married to Turkish citizens), especially those who wore hijabs, were questioned intensively at Ashgabad airport on their return to Turkmenistan. "Why do you wear a headscarf?" one woman cited MSS secret police officers as asking her in a 24 January report on Alternative Turkmenistan News. "How often do you pray the namaz? Do you go to the mosque? Does your husband go to the mosque? How long have you been religiously active?"

MSS secret police officers took the woman, and several others in similar situations from the same inbound flight, to a separate room for questioning. They also checked the content of their phones.

Last-ditch appeal against 12-year jail terms

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

On 11 July, Turkmenistan's Supreme Court is reportedly due to hear the appeal by five men jailed in August 2017 for 12 years each. The men were punished for meeting to study their faith using the works of theologian Said Nursi, the first such known prosecution in Turkmenistan.

The appeal of five Sunni Muslims against their 12-year jail terms is due to be heard at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabad tomorrow (11 July), Balkan Regional Court officials told Forum 18. The men were sentenced in Balkan Region of western Turkmenistan in August 2017 to punish them for meeting with others to study their faith.

Four of the five are being held in the top-security Ovadan-Depe prison in the desert north of the capital Ashgabad. Other prisoners there are known to have been tortured and some have died from maltreatment or neglect (see below).

Forum 18 has been unable to establish if the same lawyer who represented the five men at their trial will be representing them again. Nor has it been able to establish if the men will be present for the appeal hearing at the Supreme Court.

The five men – now aged between 37 and 58 - were punished for meeting to study the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, particularly his collection "Risale-i Nur" (Messages of Light), according to the verdict seen by Forum 18 (see below).

Typically, such Muslims meet in homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together. The authorities in various states of the region accuse them of being members of an "extremist" group named

"Nurjylar" (from the Turkish "Nurcular", meaning "Nursi followers"). Such Muslims deny any such group exists.

"As far as is known, this is the first trial of a community of readers of 'Risale-i Nur' in Turkmenistan," Vitaly Ponomarev of the Moscow-based human rights group Memorial, who has followed the case, noted on 9 July.

The isolated top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe (Picturesque Hill) where four of the five are being held is located in the Karakum desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad.

At least some of the four men in Ovadan-Depe prison are believed to have been among prisoners there allowed to receive a rare visit from relatives on 28 June, Ponomarev added (see below).

Relatives of other prisoners held there often have no information as to whether they are still alive.

The address of the top-security Ovadan-Depe prison is:

Ahal velayat
Upravlenie politsii Ahalskogo velayata
uchr. AH-T/2
Turkmenistan

Five 12-year jail terms for meeting to study faith

A panel of three judges at Balkan Regional Court, chaired by Judge Ogulbayram Bayramowa, sentenced the five Muslim men in the regional capital Balkanabad on 15 August 2017. Each received a 12-year jail term in strict regime labour camps, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18.

The verdict claims that the trial was open and that none of the five men had a criminal record already. Leading the prosecution case in court was Saparmammed Saparmammedow of Balkan Regional Prosecutor's Office. The lawyer Ogultach Atayewa defended the five men.

The five Muslims jailed were:

- 1) Jumanazar Yuldashowich Hojambetow, born 17 April 1981, ethnic Uzbek, single, unemployed, lived in Koneurgench and Balkanabad
- 2) Begejik Begejikow, born 23 January 1963, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in Balkanabad
- 3) Ahmet Bayramberdiyew Mammedurdyyew, born 13 August 1978, ethnic Turkmen, married with 2 children, worked as guard at oil company, lived in Balkanabad
- 4) Meret Hydyrowich Owezow, born 16 February 1960, ethnic Turkmen, married with 4 children, unemployed, lived in village of Gokje in Mary Region
- 5) Myraturdy Shamyradow, born 7 May 1973, ethnic Turkmen, married, businessman, lived in Mollanepes in Mary Region

The court convicted the five men under three Criminal Code Articles:

Article 177, Part 3 punishes "Incitement of social, ethnic or religious hatred with the use or threat of physical violence , or conducted by an organised group" with prison terms of between three and eight years.

Article 275, Part 2 punishes "Participation in the activity of criminal structures" with prison terms of between five and 12 years with confiscation of property.

Article 275.1, Part 2 punishes "Storage or distribution of property of criminal structures and planning the financing of them" with prison terms of between five and ten years with confiscation of property.

In addition to the 12-year strict regime prison terms, the court ordered that religious books and materials seized from four of the men and another man should be handed "without compensation" to Balkan Regional Religious Affairs Department. Memory chips seized from two of the men were ordered destroyed. Mobile phones and 4,495 Manats in cash were ordered handed over "for the benefit of the state".

Appeals 11 July

Although the sentences were read out in court on 15 August 2017, the written verdict was not handed to the defendants for some time. The five men then lodged appeals. As the cases were initially heard by a Regional Court, the appeals were sent to the Supreme Court in Ashgabad.

The appeals are due to be heard at the Supreme Court on 11 July 2018, officials at Balkan Regional Court told Forum 18 on 9 July.

The woman who answered the phone of Judge Bayramowa on 9 July told Forum 18 it was a wrong number.

The desk officer at Balkan Regional Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 9 July that Saparmammedow, who led the prosecution case in court, was away on holiday for one month. He refused to put Forum 18 through to any other official. He said that an official from the General Prosecutor's Office would be at any appeal hearing at the Supreme Court.

2017 arrests

The first arrest – of Hojambetow – came on 18 May 2017. The arrests of two more – Begejikow and Mammetyurdyew – followed on 17 June 2017. The final two of the group – Owezow and Shamyradow – were arrested on 27 June 2017.

The state prosecutor accused the men of "criminal activity as adherents of the ideology of the Nurjylar religious sect, having created an organised criminal group and participating in the activity of the afore-mentioned criminal structures with the aim of inciting ethnic, religious or other social hatred", according to the verdict.

The prosecutor accused the men of meeting in groups, including a mid-November 2015 meeting at Mammetyurdyew's home in Balkanabad. He claimed they "actively spread the Nurjylar sect's ideology", recruited new members and "used printed publications of this sect". He claimed this led to "differences of view, religious hatred and conflicts between individuals".

The prosecutor claimed that Hojambetow moved from his home town of Koneurgench to

Balkanabad in January 2017. He used his rented flat in Balkanabad as an "educational centre, as well as to hold propagandistic events".

Why the transfer to Ovadan-Depe?

Despite the verdict that states that the five men are to serve their terms at a strict regime labour camp, four of the five men were transferred to the much harsher Ovadan-Depe prison, Ponomarev of Memorial human rights group noted.

The fifth prisoner – apparently a former police officer or other official – was sent to serve his sentence at the special labour camp for former law-enforcement officials at Akdash near Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) in Balkan Region (BL-K/4).

Forum 18 has been unable to establish which four prisoners of conscience were sent to Ovadan-Depe and which one to Akdash.

Prison meeting

More than 30 relatives of prisoners accused of "Islamic extremism" were brought by bus from Ashgabad to the isolated Ovadan-Depe prison on 28 June to meet their jailed relatives, Ponomarev of Memorial noted. They were able to talk to them for about 40 minutes through a window. This was the first such meeting between prisoners and relatives since they were jailed.

One wife – who had not even known where her jailed husband had been held for the previous ten months – noted that he had become very thin. Officials told her that she would be allowed a further meeting in two months' time.

Among the prisoners able to meet relatives were at least some of the four of the Muslims sentenced to punish them for meeting to study Nursi's works, Ponomarev added.

Torture, deaths of prisoners of conscience

From early 2013, the authorities arrested more than 100 Muslims in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabad who had participated in an informal Sunni Muslim study group led by Bahram Saparov. Saparov and 19 others were arrested in March 2013 and sentenced to long prison terms in May 2013. Further large groups were sentenced at subsequent closed trials (see F18News 23 January 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2249).

Most or all the prisoners are believed to be held at Ovadan-Depe, with little information as to their conditions or even as to whether they are still alive.

At least three of the Muslims from Turkmenabad have died in Ovadan-Depe prison of illness, starvation, neglect or torture. Lukman Yaylanov died in summer 2016, possibly as a result of torture, and Narkuly Baltayev several months later. Aziz Gafurov died in summer 2017. Gafurov's thin body was covered in bruises when returned to relatives (see F18News 27 September 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318).

Only one of the imprisoned participants in Saparov's Muslim study group is known to have been freed. Ahmet Mirzayev was released in late 2017 after completing his full five-year sentence.

Another Muslim prisoner, Annamurad Atdaev, was punished with a 15-year strict regime prison term after returning to Turkmenistan to renew his passport from Egypt, where he was studying Islam at Al-Azhar University (see F18News 27 September 2017

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318).

The authorities have refused to say in which prison Atdaev is being held. Successive Turkmen government responses to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances – most recently in June 2018 – have failed to give his whereabouts, Ponomarev of Memorial noted.

Atdaev's Russian wife Darya applied to the Turkmen consulate in Moscow in April for a visa to visit Turkmenistan. Officials told her any decision would be taken in Ashgabad. She has heard nothing more, Ponomarev added.

Jehovah's Witnesses have also been jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

Two conscientious objectors, both Jehovah's Witnesses, were jailed for one year in January. One had just completed a corrective labour sentence. They were the first jailings of conscientious objectors since 2014 (see F18News 23 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363).

Jailings of conscientious objectors resume

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (23.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2updRsi> - *Two conscientious objectors, both Jehovah's Witnesses, were jailed for one year in January. One had just completed a corrective labour sentence. These are the first jailings of conscientious objectors since 2014. No prisoners of conscience are known to have been freed under the Novruz amnesty.*

For the first time since 2014, courts in Turkmenistan have again handed down prison terms on young men unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. At least two conscientious objectors, both Jehovah's Witnesses, are known to have been jailed so far in 2018. For one of them this was the second conviction on the same charges.

Between 2014 and 2017, the authorities punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. In a typical sentence, in February 2017 a court sentenced Jehovah's Witness Vepa Matyakubov to two years' corrective labour, meaning that he lives at home but 20 percent of his salary is withheld by the state budget (see F18News 27 September 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318).

In March 2017, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee again called on Turkmenistan to end punishments for conscientious objectors and introduce an alternative, civilian service. Turkmenistan has so far ignored this (see below).

No official would explain to Forum 18 why Turkmenistan has long failed to introduce a civilian alternative to military service (see below).

The UN Human Rights Committee has already found that Turkmenistan violated the human rights of 10 Jehovah's Witnesses by convicting them for conscientious objection to military service. The Committee is considering five further appeals (see below).

Meanwhile, none of the prisoners of conscience known to have been jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief is known to have been freed in the prisoner amnesty decreed on 20 March.

Many Muslims, as well as a third Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov, are known to be serving prison terms to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Many of the Muslims are being held incommunicado in the top security Ovadan-Depe prison, where some have also died of apparent torture or neglect (see below).

No conscientious objection, no alternative service

Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defence as a "sacred duty" of everyone and states that military service is compulsory for men. Turkmenistan ignored the recommendation of a July 2016 legal review of the draft Constitution by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation that it should include a provision for alternative, civilian service (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. A proposed Alternative Service Law was reportedly drafted in 2013, but officials have been unable to tell Forum 18 if and when it might be adopted (see F18News 29 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2002).

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of religious conscience face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

In March 2017, at the end of its review of Turkmenistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee again called on the authorities to end punishments for those unable to perform military service on grounds of conscience and introduce an alternative, civilian service (CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2).

"The State party should revise its legislation without undue delay with a view to clearly recognizing the right to conscientious objection to military service," the Committee declared, "provide for alternative service of a civilian nature outside the military sphere and not under military command for conscientious objectors, and halt all prosecutions of individuals who refuse to perform military service on grounds of conscience and release those who are currently serving prison sentences."

Why no implementation of UN call?

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities have chosen not to implement the UN Human Rights Committee's repeated calls to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service and to halt prosecutions.

Pirnazar Hudainazarov, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, refused to discuss why Turkmenistan has long failed to introduce a civilian alternative

service and has resumed jailings. "Talk to the Foreign Ministry," he told Forum 18 from parliament on 23 March and put the phone down.

Telephones at the Foreign Ministry's International Organisations Department, Press Office and other departments went unanswered each time Forum 18 called the same day.

An official of the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself on 23 March.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was elected by parliamentary deputies to the new post in March 2017. No contact details are publicly available.

First 2018 jailing

The authorities arrested Jehovah's Witness Arslan Begenchov (born 15 May 1999) on 2 January 2018 in his home region of Lebap in eastern Turkmenistan after he refused to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience.

On 17 January, Charjew District Court sentenced Begenchov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 to one year's imprisonment, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. On 29 January, Begenchov's lawyer lodged an appeal against this court decision. However, on 13 February Lebap Regional Court rejected the appeal and upheld the sentence.

The chancellery at Lebap Regional Court refused to discuss Begenchov's case with Forum 18 on 23 March.

A further complaint against the court sentence was sent on Begenchov's behalf to the Prosecutor's Office of Lebap Region's Charjew District, with copies to the General Prosecutor's Office and the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in Ashgabat. The appeals complained that Begenchov's jailing violated Turkmenistan's international human rights commitments, Jehovah's Witnesses added.

Begenchov is still being held in the pre-trial detention centre LB-D/9 in the regional capital Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat].

Second jailing follows

Less than two weeks after Begenchov was sentenced, the second Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector so far in 2018 was jailed. Kerven Kakabayev (born 9 September 1996), who is from Koneurgench in the northern Dashoguz Region, was called up soon after his earlier criminal conviction expired in late 2017.

Koneurgench City Court convicted Kakabayev on 29 January 2018 under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The judge sentenced him also to one year's imprisonment.

An official at Dashoguz Regional Court refused to tell Forum18 on 23 March if Kakabayev had appealed against his sentence.

The official who answered the phone at Dashoguz Region Military Prosecutor's Office refused to discuss Kakabayev's case. "We can't give any information by phone," he told Forum 18 on 23 March. Asked why Kakabayev had been jailed because he was unable to perform military service on grounds of conscience, the official responded: "That's how it is. We have an order which we have to fulfil."

This is the second sentence on the same charges for Kakabayev. In December 2015 a court sentenced him to a term of corrective labour under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. Twenty per cent of his wages were ordered handed to the state (see F18News 5 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196).

Following his January 2018 conviction, the prison authorities transferred Kakabayev to the general regime labour camp in the desert near Seydi, in the eastern Lebap Region. Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp. Among the current prisoners of conscience held there is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov (see below).

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat
Seydi
uchr. LB-K/12
Turkmenistan

UN Human Rights Committee decisions ignored

The UN Human Rights Committee has already issued decisions against Turkmenistan in 10 cases of conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection to military service.

Six of these decisions were handed down in July 2016, with the UN Committee finding violations not only over the denial of access to an alternative to military service, but over torture in custody and prison conditions which violated the individuals' human rights. In four of the six cases, the UN Committee found that the conscientious objectors had been punished twice for the same "crime" (see F18News 3 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

Jehovah's Witnesses lament that the Turkmen government has failed to implement these decisions. They declared on 4 July 2017 that "by prosecuting and punishing conscientious objectors, the Turkmenistan government continues to violate its international commitments to protect human rights". They complained of the then corrective labour sentences, which two young Jehovah's Witnesses were serving. "In other cases, officials subject conscientious objectors to severe pressure in an effort to force them to compromise their sincerely held beliefs."

Among the ten Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors the violation of whose rights the UN Committee had recognised was the former prisoner Zafar Abdullayev. It found in March 2015 that the authorities should conduct an "impartial, effective and thorough" investigation of his torture while in detention, prosecute "any person(s) found responsible", provide "full reparation, including appropriate compensation", and expunge Abdullayev's criminal record.

The Committee noted in March 2017 a 9 April 2016 submission by Abdullayev's representative that his record "has not been expunged, nor has he received any compensation". The Committee noted: "On 4 April 2016, [Abdullayev] submitted a letter to the Prosecutor General of Turkmenistan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, requesting a meeting to discuss what steps could be taken to fully implement the Committee's Views. No answer has been received as of yet."

The Committee decided at its March 2017 session to continue "follow-up dialogue" with Turkmenistan over Abdullayev's case (CCPR/C/119/3).

The UN Human Rights Committee is still considering the appeals by four more Jehovah's Witness former imprisoned conscientious objectors: Arslan Dovletov, Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov and Atamurat Suvkhanov. Also awaiting a decision is Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Danatar Durdyev, who was fined. These appeals were lodged in 2012 and 2013 (see F18News 5 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2196).

Amnesty, but no known prisoner of conscience releases

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov signed a prisoner amnesty decree to mark the Novruz spring festival, the government website announced on 20 March 2018. It said that those chosen for amnesty would have their prison terms cut short or requirements to live in certain places quashed.

The announcement of the decree did not say how many prisoners would be freed. The exile news website Alternative Turkmenistan News calculated the same day that about 1,000 prisoners had been included in the amnesty. Some 300 prisoners had been freed from the Seydi Labour Camp and a further 10 from the labour camp in Tejen, including some sentenced for rape or murder. However the news website noted that no prisoner of conscience is known to be among those amnestied.

Forum 18 has received no information that any of the known Muslim or Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience have been freed.

Torture, deaths of prisoners of conscience

From early 2013, the authorities arrested more than 100 Muslims in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabad who had participated in an informal Sunni Muslim study group led by Bahram Saparov. Saparov and 19 others were arrested in March 2013 and sentenced to long prison terms in May 2013. Further large groups were sentenced at subsequent closed trials (see F18News 23 January 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2249).

Most or all the prisoners are believed to be held in the isolated top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe (Picturesque Hill) in the Karakum desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabad. No outsider is able to establish if they are still alive. Relatives often have no information as to whether they are still alive.

At least three of the Muslims from Turkmenabad have died in Ovadan-Depe prison of illness, starvation, neglect or torture. Lukman Yaylanov died in summer 2016, possibly as a result of torture, and Narkuly Baltayev several months later. Aziz Gafurov died in summer 2017. Gafurov's thin body was covered in bruises when returned to relatives (see F18News 27 September 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318).

Only one of the imprisoned participants in Saparov's Muslim study group is known to have been freed. Ahmet Mirzayev was released in late 2017, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 20 December 2017. He had served his full five-year sentence.

Another Muslim prisoner, Annamurad Atdaev, was punished with a 15-year strict regime prison term after returning to Turkmenistan to renew his passport from Egypt, where he was studying Islam at Al-Azhar University (see F18News 27 September 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318).

In April 2017 rumours circulated in Ashgabat that Atdaev was held in solitary confinement in Ovadan-Depe prison. The Turkmen government told the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in May 2017 that Atdaev was being held in the Ð□R-Ð□/16 labour camp in Tejen. "However, this information has turned out to be inaccurate," the Prove They Are Alive campaign noted in a February 2018 report on disappeared prisoners in Turkmenistan (http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/List-of-the-disappeared-in-TM-prisons-Prove-Feb-2018_eng.pdf).

In June and October 2017 in response to a request from the Russian embassy, the Turkmen authorities reported that Atdaev "is in a place of confinement" (without any details), the campaign added.

"According to unconfirmed information, in November or early December 2017 Atdaev's mother and sister were provided a meeting with him in Ashgabat, where he was brought from the Ovadan-Depe prison. Reportedly, the authorities demanded that the relatives not tell anyone about this meeting, including the prisoner's wife."

On 18 October 2016 the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances asked Turkmenistan to be allowed to visit. The UN website indicates that Turkmenistan has not agreed to a Working Group visit.

The address of the top-security Ovadan-Depe prison is:

Ahal velayat
Upravlenie politsii Ahalskogo velayata
uchr. AH-T/2
Turkmenistan

Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov, held in Seydi Labour Camp, was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship.

All Hemdemov's attempts to overturn his sentence on appeal have failed. The Supreme Court in August 2015 denied his appeal because Hemdemov "propagates the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses" (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).