

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Two jailed brothers, two second convictions***
- ***Two years in prison for two Jehovah's Witnesses objecting to military service***
- ***Raids, fines for religious meetings***
- ***Conscientious objector jailed after second conviction***
- ***First 2020 conscientious objector jailing***
- ***Raids, searches, fines, threats, beatings, headscarf bans***
- ***Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses***

---

## **Two jailed brothers, two second convictions**

***The jailing on 6 August for two years each of two brothers from Dashoguz Region – Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov – brings to four the known number of Jehovah's Witnesses jailed as conscientious objectors in 2020. Six others jailed in 2018 and 2019 are still serving jail terms. Both brothers expressed willingness to do a civilian alternative service, but Turkmenistan – despite repeated United Nations recommendations – has failed to introduce one.***

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (10.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3hw9DTM> - On 6 August, Niyazov District Court in Dashoguz Region of northern Turkmenistan jailed Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Sanjarbek Saburov – who is due to turn 26 on 12 August – and his 21-year-old brother Eldor Saburov. Each was handed the maximum punishment of a two-year jail term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. For both brothers, this is their second criminal conviction on the same charges.

Both Saburov brothers were summoned to a Military Conscription Office in April to report for military service. Both had told the Conscription Office (Sanjarbek in October 2019 and Eldor in spring 2020) that they were ready to perform an alternative civilian service. Turkmenistan does not offer an alternative to compulsory military service (see below).

The two brothers' trial at Niyazov District Court was closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The only non-court staff allowed to attend were their parents (see below).

The convictions of the Saburov brothers bring to four the number of conscientious objectors to military service known to have been jailed so far in 2020. They also bring to 23 the number of known criminal convictions for conscientious objection since January 2018.

The Saburov brothers are now being held at the pre-trial detention prison in the city of Dashoguz, 450 kms (280 miles) north of the capital Ashgabat. They are considering appealing against their convictions to Dashoguz Regional Court, though courts and prisons often obstruct such appeals (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors to military service and do not undertake any kind of activity supporting any country's military. But they are willing to undertake an alternative, totally civilian form of service, as is the right of all conscientious objectors to military service under international human rights law.

The sentences handed down to the Saburov brothers bring to 10 the number of conscientious objectors to compulsory military service known - as of 10 August 2020 - to be serving sentences. All of them are Jehovah's Witnesses (see full list below).

Including Eziz Dovletmuradovich Atabayev (born 15 March 1998), who has been serving a jail term since 2018, 10 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are serving jail terms of between one and four years. Eight of them are imprisoned in Seydi Labour Camp in the eastern Lebap Region, and the two Saburov brothers are expected to be transferred to the same labour camp (see full list below).

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls, for example by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, to introduce a genuine civilian alternative to compulsory military service, to stop prosecuting and punishing conscientious objectors, and to compensate those it has punished.

Asked about the Saburov brothers' prosecution and whether it had been involved, the man who answered the phone of the deputy head of Dashoguz Region's Military Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18: "There were no such cases here" (see below).

The official who answered the phone at the office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova told Forum 18 on 10 August that she was out at a meeting in the Foreign Ministry. He said no one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

Asked why the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service in line with repeated United Nations (UN) recommendations, and why young men continue to be imprisoned, Ata (last name unknown) of the Foreign Ministry's International Organisations Department told Forum 18 that Turkmenistan "is dealing with these bodies, including the UN". He said he did not agree that Turkmenistan was failing to implement UN human rights recommendations (see below).

The UN Human Rights Committee has published 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

Another Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2018 and is awaiting a decision (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention In May 2020 on behalf of 19 current or former jailed conscientious objectors. The 19 men are the eight currently imprisoned in Seydi Labour Camp, plus others who have been released after serving earlier sentences (see below).

Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief – all of them Muslims – are serving far longer jail terms (see below).

### ***No alternative to compulsory military 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.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience generally 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.

Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2 punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime "by means of inflicting injury to oneself, or by simulation of illness, by means of forgery of documents, or other fraudulent ways". Punishment is a jail term of one to four years. The first known use of Article 219, Part 2 to punish a conscientious objector was the case of Azat Ashirov, while Serdar Dovletov's case was the second (see below).

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

Courts jailed 12 conscientious objectors in 2018, two of them for two years and 10 for one year. Courts jailed 7 conscientious objectors in 2019, one of them for four years, one for three years, one for two years and four for one year.

### ***Calls for alternative civilian service ignored***

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service. The most recent call came in the latest United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee Decision, published in September 2019.

The Human Rights Committee has issued 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. In its most recent such Decision, published on 17 September 2019 (CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013), it ruled that the right to freedom of religion or belief of former conscientious objectors Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov, and Atamurad Suvhanov had been violated by their jailing.

Nazarov and Sharipov were jailed in 2012, and Suvhanov (for the second time) in 2013. The men had lodged their Human Rights Committee appeals in August 2013.

All three men also complained of "inhuman and degrading treatment" after their arrests. The Human Rights Committee stressed that Turkmenistan is under an obligation to make reparation to Nazarov, Sharipov and Suvhanov for the violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including to "expunge their criminal records and to provide them with adequate compensation. The State party is also under an obligation to avoid similar violations of the Covenant in the future".

The Committee therefore urged Turkmenistan to meet its obligations to avoid similar violations such as by changing the law, "for instance, by providing the possibility of exemption from service or alternative service of a civilian nature".

Another conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee on 20 June 2018 and is awaiting a decision, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. When sentenced in Charjew to one year's imprisonment in January 2018, Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014.

### ***Why no alternative civilian service?***

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not introduce an alternative civilian service and why conscientious objectors who are willing to perform such an alternative service, like the 10 Jehovah's Witness young men, continue to be jailed.

The telephone of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev went unanswered on 10 August.

The official who answered the phone at the office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova told Forum 18 on 10 August that she was out at a meeting in the Foreign Ministry. He said no one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

Asked why the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service in line with repeated United Nations (UN) recommendations, and why young men continue to be imprisoned, Ata (last name unknown) of the Foreign Ministry's International Organisations Department told Forum 18 that Turkmenistan "is dealing with these bodies, including the UN".

Ata said he did not agree that Turkmenistan is failing to implement UN human rights recommendations. "Our Department is dealing with difficult issues, including with the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation and the OSCE," he claimed. "We are trying to do our best."

### ***Many prisoners of conscience***

The 10 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 in July 2018. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

More than 60 Muslims from in and around the eastern city of 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 at 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.

### ***Two-year jailings***

Jehovah's Witness Sanjarbek Davranbekovich Saburov (born 12 August 1994), from the northern city of Dashoguz, refused military service during the autumn 2019 call-up. In October 2019, he wrote to the Military Conscription Office explaining his refusal on grounds of conscience and expressing a willingness to perform a civilian alternative service, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The Military Conscription Office again called up Sanjarbek Saburov in the spring 2020 call-up. On 7 May, officials wrote to him threatening criminal prosecution if he continued to refuse to perform compulsory military service.

The Military Conscription Office called up Sanjarbek Saburov's younger brother Eldor Davranbekovich Saburov (born 9 April 1999) in the spring 2020 call-up. He too told the Conscription Office that he could not perform military service on grounds of conscience and expressing a willingness to perform a civilian alternative service.

On 2 July, Prosecutors wrote to both Saburov brothers telling them a case had been opened against both under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"). They were summoned to court for trial on 6 August. On 4 July, the Prosecutor's Office again summoned younger brother Eldor Saburov.

At their trial at Niyazov District Court on 6 August, the Judge found both Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov guilty under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The Judge sentenced both to two years' jail, the maximum punishment under this Article, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The two brothers' trial was closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The only non-court staff allowed to attend were their parents.

Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov were arrested in the courtroom after the verdict was handed down. They were taken to the Temporary Detention Prison (DZ-E/7) in Dashoguz Region. They are expected to be transferred to the labour camp at Seydi, where the other eight jailed conscientious objectors are all being held.

The brothers and their parents are considering an appeal to Dashoguz Regional Court, Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

Reached on 10 August, the chancellery at Niyazov District Court refused to give Forum 18 any information about the trial by phone.

"Beyond the emotional toll, imprisonment will cause acute hardship for their parents," Jehovah's Witnesses noted. "Their father suffers from chronic back pain, which impairs his ability to work. The brothers support the family by growing cotton. Since both brothers are imprisoned, their parents will no longer have the financial support they need. Instead, the parents will now have to care for their sons' needs in prison."

### ***Brothers' earlier convictions***

For both Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov, their 2020 convictions were the second on the same charges.

Sanjarbek Saburov refused military service during the spring 2016 call-up. On 17 July 2016 he was placed in preventive detention while awaiting trial. On 9 August 2016, a Judge handed him a two-year suspended sentence under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. He was released in the courtroom after more than three weeks' detention.

In 2017, Eldor Saburov similarly refused to undertake military service on grounds of conscience. On 19 December 2017, Niyazov District Court sentenced him under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 to two years' corrective labour, with 20 per cent of his wages taken by the State.

### ***Second convictions***

Like the Saburov brothers, many other conscientious objectors have been convicted twice on the same charges when they continue to refuse renewed call-up to compulsory military service after completing their first sentences.

In February 2020, Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov (born 19 August 1998), a Jehovah's Witness from the northern Dashoguz Region's ethnic Uzbek minority, was convicted for a second time for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. He was given a two-year jail term. In February 2017 he had been convicted under Criminal Code

Article 219, Part 1 for refusing military service. The sentence allowed him to live at home under restrictions, but during the two years the state took 20 per cent of his wages.

Matyakubov's older brother Dovran was convicted and imprisoned twice for his conscientious objection to military service, in December 2010 and again in December 2012. Dovran Matyakubov was released from his second sentence under amnesty in October 2014.

Kerven Kakabayev, a Jehovah's Witness from Koneurgench in Dashoguz Region, was sentenced in December 2014 to two years' corrective labour, with the state taking 20 per cent of his income, for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Soon after completing his term, the Military Conscription Office again called him up and he was jailed in January 2018 for one year. He was freed at the end of his sentence in January 2019.

### ***Completed jail terms***

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Muhammetali Charygeldiyevich Saparmyradov (born 11 November 1995) was released from Seydi Labour Camp on 19 March 2020 after completing his one-year jail term in full, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Bayramaly City Court sentenced Saparmyradov on 19 March 2019 under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 to one year's ordinary regime labour camp.

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev (born 22 June 1999) was released from Seydi Labour Camp on 26 June 2020 after completing his two-year jail term in full, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Turkmenbashi City Court sentenced Annayev on 26 June 2018 under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 to two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

### ***Delayed appeal rejected after sentence completed***

On 15 April 2020, the Supreme Court in Ashgabat rejected the appeal by former jailed conscientious objector Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The Supreme Court informed his family of the decision in June.

Rozmetov was jailed for one year in July 2018 at a trial held in the conference hall of Gurbansoltan eje District Military Conscription Office in Dashoguz Region. The court verdict said that the trial was open, but gave no reason for the decision to hold the trial in the Conscription Office. It is unknown if the trial was meant to send a signal to local young men of what happens to those who refuse compulsory military service. The Regional Court rejected his first appeal the same month.

Rozmetov was freed from Seydi Labour Camp in July 2019 after completing his full one-year sentence.

### ***Eight conscientious objectors currently in Seydi Labour Camp***

The Saburov brothers' jailing brings to 10 the number of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors known - as of 10 August - to be serving jail terms. Eight of them are currently imprisoned at the harsh Seydi Labour Camp in the desert in Lebap Region. The two Saburov brothers are expected to be transferred to this camp.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat  
Seydi

uchr. LB-E/12  
Turkmenistan

In his complaint to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, former Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Aibek Salayev stated that conditions in Seydi Labour Camp, where he was held, were "inhuman".

Salayev noted that the Camp was "known for its overcrowdedness, harsh climatic conditions, scarce supplies of food, medication and personal hygiene products, and for tuberculosis, skin diseases, its very high mortality rate, and physical abuse". Officials also threatened him with rape in the Camp.

The UN Human Rights Committee found that Turkmenistan had violated the rights of Salayev and another Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev. The Views of the Committee on the case (CCPR/C/125/D/2448/2014) were adopted on 18 April 2019. It stated that Turkmenistan "is also under an obligation to take all steps necessary to prevent similar violations from occurring in the future".

### ***Further UN complaint***

On 20 May 2020, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on behalf of 19 current or former jailed conscientious objectors, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The 19 men are the eight currently imprisoned in Seydi Labour Camp, plus others who have been released after serving earlier sentences.

### ***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. Seven were jailed under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"), Ashirov and Dovletov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2, and Atahanov under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2:

1) Eziz Dovletmuradovich Atabayev; born 15 March 1998; sentenced 19 December 2018 Dashoguz City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 15 January 2019 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

2) Bahtiyar Amirjanovich Atahanov; born 17 June 2000; sentenced 15 July 2019 Tejen City Court under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2; appeal rejected 20 August 2019 Ahal Regional Court; four years' ordinary regime labour camp.

3) Azat Gurbanmuhammedovich Ashirov, born 7 January 1999; sentenced 31 July 2019 Abadan District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appeal rejected 3 September 2019 Ashgabat City Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

4) David Andronikovich Petrosov, born 15 May 2001; sentenced 30 September 2019 Ashgabat's Kopetdag District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

5) Selim Yolamanovich Taganov, born 22 March 2001; sentenced 3 October 2019 Ashgabat's Berkararlyk District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.

6) Serdar Nurmuhammedovich Dovletov, born 2 December 1993; sentenced 12 November 2019 Bayramali City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appealed

rejected 3 December 2019 Mary Regional Court; three years' ordinary regime labour camp.

7) Kamiljan Ergeshovich Ergashov, born 27 June 2001; sentenced 13 January 2020 Niyazov District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

8) Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov, born 19 August 1998; sentenced 17 February 2020 Boldumsaz District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

9) Sanjarbek Davranbekovich Saburov, born 12 August 1994; sentenced 6 August 2020 Niyazov District Court, Dashoguz Region, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

10) Eldor Davranbekovich Saburov, born 9 April 1999; sentenced 6 August 2020 Niyazov District Court, Dashoguz Region, under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

---

## **Two years in prison for two Jehovah's Witnesses objecting to military service**

JW Int'l Headquarters (09.08.2020) – On 6 August, a Turkmen court sentenced siblings Eldor, 21, and Sanjarbek, 25, Saburov to two years in prison for their conscientious objection to military service. The court refused the brothers' request to appeal. This is the second time both were convicted for their Christian beliefs as Jehovah's Witnesses.

### ***What do international experts think?***

**Rachel Denber, Human Rights Watch, Deputy Director, Europe and Central Asia Division**

"Authorities in Turkmenistan should immediately withdraw the criminal charges against Eldor and Sanjarbek Saburov. The government should, in line with recommendations by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, offer alternative civilian service to people who for reasons of conscience cannot serve in the military. They should also release the other Jehovah's Witnesses in custody for exercising their right to freedom of conscience." [denberr@hrw.org](mailto:denberr@hrw.org)

**Dr. Edward Lemon, Kennan Institute Fellow, expert on Central Asian affairs**

"Turkmenistan is a closed state with one of the poorest human rights records in the world. Like other countries in Central Asia, Turkmenistan has a conscription-based military. Each year, teams of soldiers roam the streets forcibly press-ganging young people into serving in the military, a practice known as oblava. The law obligates each male citizen between 18 and 27 years of age to serve unless they have justifiable reasons not to. Conscientious objection is not viewed as a justifiable reason and those who avoid military service can be jailed for two years. Prison conditions are inhumane and torture is widely used in the justice system." [elemen@dmgs.org](mailto:elemen@dmgs.org)

**Willy Fautre, Human Rights Without Frontiers, director**



"Human Rights Without Frontiers is appalled by the Turkmen court's decision to sentence two peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses to two years of imprisonment simply for objecting to military service on the ground of their religious beliefs. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has already issued 13 decisions in favor of 15 other Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to prison for the same reason in the last few years. Human Rights Without Frontiers calls upon the authorities of Turkmenistan to urgently bring its legislation on this issue in line with international standards and in the meantime to adopt a moratorium on the sentencing of conscientious objectors. [w.fautre@hrwf.org](mailto:w.fautre@hrwf.org)

### **UN Human Rights Committee (HRC)**

Of the 13 decisions in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses from Turkmenistan, the most recent is [CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013](#), dated November 5, 2019. More information on previous UN HRC decisions is available upon request.

### **European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)**

- ECHR has punished other lands, such as Armenia, for not having ACS
- [Bayatyan v. Armenia \(2011\)](#) (see §124-128), the ECHR ruled that Armenia violated article 9 of the convention (ICCPR)
- The ICCPR (which incidentally Turkmenistan ratified) protects the right of conscientious objectors to refuse to perform military service
- As a result of the ECHR ruling, [Armenia](#) is now among countries like [Taiwan](#) that are models for how ACS benefits the State as well as the conscientious objectors

### ***Saburov Brothers' Case History***

In 2016, Sanjarbek respectfully refused to be drafted into the army. Subsequently, he was convicted and sentenced to two years of probation.

The following year Eldor also refused to participate in military service. He was sentenced to two years of correctional labor with 20 percent of his wages garnished by the State.

According to Turkmen law, conscientious objectors can be criminally charged a second time if they continue to refuse military service. In April 2020, the military recruiting office again summoned the brothers to enlist. Both refused to be drafted. They were criminally prosecuted, which resulted in their imprisonment.

Beyond the emotional toll, imprisonment will cause acute hardship for their parents. Their father suffers from chronic back pain, which impairs his ability to work. The brothers support the family by growing cotton. Since both brothers are imprisoned, their parents will no longer have the financial support they need. Instead, the parents will now have to care for their sons' needs in prison.

The Saburov brothers are willing to contribute to society and would be please to perform alternative civilian service (ACS). However, Turkmenistan does not offer ACS, only futile imprisonment.

**Jarrod Lopes, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, states:** "It's a travesty for these young men to be imprisoned simply for their Christian beliefs. Including the

Saburov brothers, there are ten young Jehovah's Witnesses in prison in Turkmenistan for conscientious objection. Earlier this year, Turkmenistan marked the [25th anniversary of its permanent international neutrality](#). Yet, Turkmen authorities continue to severely punish its citizens for taking a neutral stand. International human rights bodies have repeatedly called on Turkmen leaders to stop imprisoning conscientious objectors and provide them an alternative to compulsory military service. We hope soon Turkmenistan will amend its law to meet international standards and end the needless imprisonment of peaceful young men."

---

## **Raids, fines for religious meetings**

Forum 18 (19.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Uo5uXq> - Police in Dashoguz raided two Protestant home meetings in February. During one raid, officers threatened to take away the host's grandchildren and have other participants sacked from work. The host was fined nearly a week's average wage. Another home owner in Lebap Region was similarly fined for hosting a Christmas celebration. Officials in Lebap Region banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques.

Police raids have continued on religious believers meeting in homes. Officers in February raided two homes in the northern Dashoguz Region where Protestants were meeting. After the first raid a court fined the home owner nearly a week's average wage. Participants in the second meeting are expecting to be summoned to court to be fined.

During the first Dashoguz Region raid, officials threatened that they would take away the home owner's grandchildren, Protestants complained to Forum 18. They also made threats to others, including about possible sackings from work (see below).

The homeowner in the eastern Lebap Region who hosted a Christmas celebration in December 2019 was fined nearly a week's average wage in late January. During the raid, officers searched the home, seized telephones and then questioned the participants at the police station. Officers later summoned participants one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints (see below).

In the southern Ahal Region, the region around the capital Ashgabat, police raided a group of Protestants meeting in a home in late 2019. Officers threatened participants not to meet. "They're used to this," one local Protestant told Forum 18. "They periodically get such visits or phone calls" (see below).

In the eastern Lebap Region, officials in February banned state employees – including those working in education, culture, health, the military and the police – from attending Friday prayers in mosques. They warned that if they were seen in mosques they would be sacked from their jobs. Officials also banned them from praying the namaz at their place of work (see below).

Meanwhile, the Customs Service in the capital Ashgabat in 2019 refused to hand over a parcel of Christian books sent to an individual from Germany. Officials told the Protestant "receiving these books is banned", but gave no explanation for the ban (see below).

The telephones of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev and the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 19 March.

***Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief***

Turkmenistan imposes [tight state controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief](#). Only approved activity in approved locations by approved religious communities is allowed. Unregistered religious activity is banned and punishable.

All religious literature is under tight state control and unapproved distribution of such literature is punishable. Sharing of faith is banned and punishable.

The regime arbitrarily denies registration to communities it does not like. Only mosques subject to the state-controlled Muftiate (led by Chief Mufti Yalkab Hojagulyyev) are allowed to exist. Only a small number of non-Muslim communities are allowed to register, while many (particularly Protestant communities outside the capital Ashgabat, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses) have had registration applications rejected.

Many of the small number of religious communities the regime had earlier allowed to register now live in legal uncertainty. The amendments to the Religion Law which came into force in April 2016 [mandated re-registration](#). The Justice Ministry is believed to have re-registered Mosques of the state-backed Muslim Board soon after. The Justice Ministry re-registered the 12 Russian Orthodox parishes in 2017, a priest told Forum 18 from Ashgabat. Two Pentecostal communities also gained re-registration.

However, a number of non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious communities complained to Forum 18 in March 2020 that the Justice Ministry has still not granted re-registration. Officials treat their previous state registration as no longer valid. This leads to fear that any of their public worship could lead to punishment.

Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone in the Justice Ministry in Ashgabat on 19 March to find out why not all communities that sought the mandatory re-registration in 2016 and 2017 have been able to receive it.

Jehovah's Witnesses say that since September 2018, government interference with their religious activity has increased. They complain of police harassment and threats, police interference with the public manifestation of belief, government denial of the right to possess religious material and government denial of registration. They also complain that the international Jehovah's Witness website, [www.jw.org](http://www.jw.org), is blocked in Turkmenistan.

### ***Fined for hosting Christmas celebration***

On 30 January, a court in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region fined a home owner 200 Manats in punishment for hosting a gathering on 26 December 2019 to celebrate Christmas, Protestants told Forum 18. The fine represents nearly a week's average wages for those in formal work. The home owner's computer was also ordered confiscated.

The court is believed to have fined the home owner under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"). In recent years, members of a variety of religious communities have been fined under Article 76. Most of the 8 Jehovah's Witnesses [known to have been fined in 2019](#) were punished under this Article.

Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 [punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducted religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance"](#) with a fine on individuals of 1 to 2 base units, on officials of 2 to 5 base units and on legal organisations of 5 to 10 base units (each base unit is 100 Manats).

Each 100 Manats is equivalent to three days' average wage for those in formal work. However, for pensioners or others without a formal job, fines can represent a severe burden.

During the raid on the 26 December 2019 Christmas gathering of Protestant women, officers [searched the home, seized telephones and questioned the women at the police station. In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints.](#)

### ***First February Dashoguz raid***

In early February, police, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers and local administration officials raided a home in the northern city of Dashoguz, where local Christians were meeting. They forced all those present, including the home owner, to go to the police station. There officers recorded their names and photographed them "as a reminder".

Officials also threatened that they would take away the home owner's grandchildren. They also made threats to others, including about possible sackings from work.

Several days later, a local court fined the home owner 200 Manats, nearly a week's average wage. The court is believed to have handed down the fine under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law").

### ***Second February Dashoguz raid***

Also in Dashoguz, on the morning of 29 February police raided a group of Protestants who were attending a house-warming celebration. "Officers barged their way into the house and started driving them outside, filming them and threatening them to make them go outside and go to the police station," a local Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Some older women refused to go to the police station, while one woman who has disabilities and cannot move unaided continued to lie on the floor.

At the police station, an MSS secret police officer – who did not give his name – read out a statement on various religious and that the group had violated the law banning religious meetings in homes. He showed three leaflets with prayers that officers had seized from some of those present, together with notebooks.

Officers pressured the detainees to write statements that they had attended an illegal religious meeting. Officers released some of the detainees after about four hours, holding some of them till later.

At least some of those present are expecting to be summoned to court, where they expect to be fined, possibly under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"). No trial had taken place by 19 March.

### ***Ahal Region raid***

In late 2019, police raided a Protestant meeting for worship in a home in a town in Ahal Region, the region surrounding the capital Ashgabat. Officers threatened those present and told them not to meet for religious purposes. No one was brought to trial or fined.

"They're used to this," one local Protestant told Forum 18. "They periodically get such visits or phone calls." The Protestant added that no raids have taken place on the group so far in 2020.

## ***State employees banned from attending mosque prayers***

Officials in Lebap Region in February banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques.

"Workers in the spheres of education, culture and health, as well as military and police officers throughout the Region were ordered not to attend Friday prayers and not to perform the namaz at their places of work," a local correspondent told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service from Lebap Region on 24 February. "They were warned that if they are seen in mosques, they will be sacked from their jobs. But a few state employees, despite the fear of losing their jobs, still go to mosques."

Heads of state agencies warned their employees of the ban, but did not explain the reasons for it, the correspondent added. "I have not yet heard that measures have been taken against anyone for visiting mosques. But according to several state employees, state security officers who conduct surveillance on mosques are at the moment limiting themselves to warnings."

The ban on state officials attending Friday prayers in mosques came as President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov attended the opening of a new government-sponsored mosque on 21 February in Lebap's regional capital Turkmenabat. Accompanying the President at the high-profile event were all six of the government-approved regional imams.

In his remarks at the mosque, the President claimed that "the government secures all the necessary conditions to protect freedom of conscience", the government website noted the same day.

Local elders who were due to meet the President at the mosque were forced to rehearse from 14 February for the following week, at times for many hours on the same day, the emigre news website Chronicles of Turkmenistan noted on 22 February. One elder, who suffered from diabetes, collapsed during one long evening rehearsal. Police bundled him out of the mosque and only there did they allow him medical attention.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why officials banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques in Lebap Region. The man who answered the phone at the regional administration's Religious Affairs Department put the phone down on 19 March as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service was similarly unable to get comment in February from the administration of Lebap Region or the MSS secret police in Turkmenabat.

## ***Customs refuse to hand over Christian books***

Friends from Germany sent a parcel of Christian books to a Protestant in Turkmenistan in 2019. However, when the individual went to the Customs Service in the capital Ashgabat to collect the books, customs officials told the Protestant "receiving these books is banned", local Protestants complained to Forum 18. Customs officials gave no explanation for the ban.

Officials also often seize religious literature and objects from individuals returning to Turkmenistan from abroad. In December 2018, security personnel at Ashgabat Airport [detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours. She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan.](#)

In addition, police often [seize religious literature they find when raiding individuals' homes or detaining individuals on the street](#). (END)

---

## Conscientious objector jailed after second conviction

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (25.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2PPTjWI> - A Dashoguz Region court jailed Jehovah's Witness Vepa Matyakubov for two years on 17 February, his second criminal conviction for refusing military service on grounds of conscience. He had offered to do an alternative civilian service but Turkmenistan does not offer this. He is likely to join nine other jailed conscientious objectors in Seydi labour camp, known for harsh conditions and torture.

On 17 February, a court in Dashoguz Region of northern Turkmenistan jailed 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Vepa Matyakubov for two years for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. This is his second criminal conviction on the same charges.

Matyakubov is the second conscientious objector to military service known to have been jailed so far in 2020. His is the 21st known criminal conviction for conscientious objection since January 2018.

Matyakubov is appealing against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court, though courts and prisons often obstruct such appeals (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors to military service and their beliefs do not allow them to undertake any kind of activity supporting any country's military. But they are willing to undertake an alternative, totally civilian form of service, as is the right of all conscientious objectors to military service under international human rights law.

The sentence handed down to Matyakubov brings to 10 the number of conscientious objectors to compulsory military service known to be serving sentences. All of them are Jehovah's Witnesses (see full list below).

Including two who have been serving jail terms since 2018, 10 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are known - as of 25 February 2020 - to be serving jail terms of between one and four years. Nine of them are imprisoned at the Labour Camp at Seydi in the eastern Lebap Region (see full list below).

Matyakubov is still being held at the pre-trial detention prison in the city of Dashoguz, 450 kms (280 miles) north of the capital Ashgabat. He is expected to be transferred to the labour camp at Seydi, where the other nine jailed conscientious objectors are all being held (see below).

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls, for example by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, to introduce a genuine civilian alternative to compulsory military service, to stop prosecuting and punishing conscientious objectors, and to compensate those it has punished.

The man who answered the phone of the deputy head of Dashoguz Region's Military

Prosecutor's Office put the phone down when Forum 18 began to ask about Matyakubov's prosecution (see below).

Forum 18 could not immediately reach any other officials to find out why Matyakubov was jailed and the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service (see below).

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has published 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

Another Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2018 and is awaiting a decision (see below).

Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief – all of them Muslims – are serving far longer jail terms (see below).

### **No alternative to compulsory military 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.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience generally 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.

Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2 punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime "by means of inflicting injury to oneself, or by simulation of illness, by means of forgery of documents, or other fraudulent ways". Punishment is a jail term of one to four years. The first known use of Article 219, Part 2 to punish a conscientious objector was the case of Azat Ashirov, while Serdar Dovletov's case was the second (see below).

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

Courts jailed 12 conscientious objectors in 2018, two of them for two years and 10 for one year. Courts jailed 7 conscientious objectors in 2019, one of them for four years, one for three years, one for two years and four for one year.

### **Calls for alternative civilian service ignored**

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service. The most recent call came in the latest United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee Decision, published in September 2019.

The Human Rights Committee has issued 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. In its most recent such Decision, published on 17 September 2019 (CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013), it ruled that the right to freedom of religion or belief of former conscientious objectors Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov, and Atamurad Suvhanov had been violated by their jailing.

Nazarov and Sharipov were jailed in 2012, and Suvhanov (for the second time) in 2013. The men had lodged their Human Rights Committee appeals in August 2013.

All three men also complained of "inhuman and degrading treatment" after their arrests. The Human Rights Committee stressed that Turkmenistan is under an obligation to make reparation to Nazarov, Sharipov and Suvhanov for the violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including to "expunge their criminal records and to provide them with adequate compensation. The State party is also under an obligation to avoid similar violations of the Covenant in the future". The Committee therefore urged Turkmenistan to meet its obligations to avoid similar violations such as by changing the law, "for instance, by providing the possibility of exemption from service or alternative service of a civilian nature".

Another conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee on 20 June 2018 and is awaiting a decision, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. When sentenced in Charjew to one year's imprisonment in January 2018, Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014.

### **Why no alternative civilian service?**

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not introduce an alternative civilian service and why conscientious objectors who are willing to perform such an alternative service, like the 10 Jehovah's Witness young men, continue to be jailed.

The telephones of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev and the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 25 February.

### **Many prisoners of conscience**

The 10 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 in July 2018. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

More than 60 Muslims from in and around the eastern city of 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 at 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.

### **Two-year Dashoguz jailing**

The authorities have again convicted Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov (born 19 August 1998), a Jehovah's Witness from the northern Dashoguz Region's ethnic Uzbek minority, for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience.

Matyakubov's older brother Dovran was convicted and imprisoned twice for his conscientious objection to military service, in December 2010 and again in December 2012. Dovran Matyakubov was released from his second sentence under amnesty in October 2014.

A Military Conscription Office summoned Vepa Matyakubov in autumn 2019 in the first



national call-up since he completed a two-year correctional labour sentence handed down in 2017. He told the Office that he could not perform military service because of his religious beliefs and said he was ready to perform a fully civilian alternative service.

Boldumsaz District Court had convicted Matyakubov in February 2017 under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 for refusing military service. The sentence allowed him to live at home under restrictions, but during the two years the state took 20 per cent of his wages.

On 1 October 2019, the Military Conscription Office declared Matyakubov fit for military service, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The District Prosecutor's Office summoned him for questioning on 13 November 2019. Prosecutors lodged a criminal case against him under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service").

Matyakubov's Indictment, dated 5 February 2020, stated that "based on an expert study" of 15 January 2020 by the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production, "the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses is not officially registered in Turkmenistan".

Jehovah's Witnesses are among many religious communities of a wide range of faiths denied state registration. Their most recent unsuccessful application was in 2008.

In February 2020, Prosecutors handed Matyakubov's case to Boldumsaz District Court. On 17 February, a Judge convicted him for a second time under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 and handed down a two-year ordinary regime labour camp term.

The same day Matyakubov completed his appeal to Dashoguz Regional Court, which was formally lodged on 21 February, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Appeals are lodged to the court that handed down the initial decision. That court then hands them on to the higher court.

The chancellery of Dashoguz Regional Court told Forum 18 on 25 February that it has not yet received Matyakubov's appeal. Telephones at Boldumsaz District Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called the same day.

Matyakubov is still being held in the Temporary Detention Prison (DZ-E/7) in Dashoguz Region. He is expected to be transferred to the labour camp at Seydi, where the other nine jailed conscientious objectors are all being held.

The telephone at the Temporary Detention Prison went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 25 February.

## **Second convictions**

Vepa Matyakubov is the second recent conscientious objector criminally sentenced twice for his military objection.

Kerven Kakabayev, a Jehovah's Witness from Koneurgench in Dashoguz Region, was sentenced in December 2014 to two years' corrective labour, with the state taking 20 per cent of his income, for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Soon after completing his term, the Military Conscription Office again called him up and he was jailed in January 2018 for one year. He was freed at the end of his sentence in January 2019.

## **Appeal rejected, transfer to labour camp**

A court has rejected the appeal of the first conscientious objector to have been jailed in 2020, Kamiljan Ergashovich Ergashov (born 27 June 2001).

Ergashov – who is from the village of Shohrat in Niyazov District of Dashoguz Region, just a few kilometres from the border with Uzbekistan - is the sole bread winner in his family.

On 13 January 2020, Niyazov District Court convicted Ergashov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service") and sentenced him to two years' imprisonment.

Ergashov appealed against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court, but it rejected his appeal.

Following the rejection of his appeal, Ergashov was transferred from the Temporary Detention Prison (DZ-E/7) in Dashoguz Region to serve his sentence in the labour camp in Seydi, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

### **Nine jailed conscientious objectors in Seydi Labour Camp**

Matyakubov's jailing brings to 10 the number of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors known - as of 25 February - to be serving jail terms. Nine of them are imprisoned at the harsh Seydi Labour Camp in the desert in Lebap Region.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

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

In his complaint to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, former Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Aibek Salayev complained that conditions in the Seydi Labour Camp where he was held were "inhuman".

Salayev noted that the Camp was "known for its overcrowdedness, harsh climatic conditions, scarce supplies of food, medication and personal hygiene products, and for tuberculosis, skin diseases, its very high mortality rate, and physical abuse". Officials also threatened him with rape in the Camp.

The UN Human Rights Committee ruled that the Turkmen authorities had violated the rights of Salayev and another Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev. The UN published the Decision (CCPR/C/125/D/2448/2014) on 18 April 2019.

### **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. Seven were jailed under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"), Ashirov and Dovletov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2, and Atahanov under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2:

1) Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev; born 22 June 1999; sentenced 26 June 2018 Turkmenbashi City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; no appeal to Balkan Region Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

- 2) Eziz Dovletmuradovich Atabayev; born 15 March 1998; sentenced 19 December 2018 Dashoguz City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 15 January 2019 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 3) Muhammetali Charygeldiyevich Saparmyradov; born 11 November 1995; sentenced 19 March 2019 Bayramaly City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; no appeal to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 4) Bahtiyar Amirjanovich Atahanov; born 17 June 2000; sentenced 15 July 2019 Tejen City Court under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2; appeal rejected 20 August 2019 Ahal Regional Court; four years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 5) Azat Gurbanmuhammedovich Ashirov, born 7 January 1999; sentenced 31 July 2019 Abadan District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appeal rejected 3 September 2019 Ashgabat City Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 6) David Andronikovich Petrosov, born 15 May 2001; sentenced 30 September 2019 Ashgabat's Kopetdag District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 7) Selim Yolamanovich Taganov, born 22 March 2001; sentenced 3 October 2019 Ashgabat's Berkararlyk District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 8) Serdar Nurmuhammedovich Dovletov, born 2 December 1993; sentenced 12 November 2019 Bayramali City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appealed rejected 3 December 2019 Mary Regional Court; three years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 9) Kamiljan Ergeshovich Ergashov, born 27 June 2001; sentenced 13 January 2020 Niyazov District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 10) Vepa Bahromovich Matyakubov, born 19 August 1998; sentenced 17 February 2020 Boldumsaz District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

---

## **First 2020 conscientious objector jailing**

***A Dashoguz Region court jailed Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Kamiljan Ergashov for two years on 13 January, the first such jailing of 2020. He had offered to do an alternative civilian service but Turkmenistan does not offer this. He is likely to join the eight other jailed conscientious objectors in Seydi labour camp, known for harsh conditions and torture.***

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (27.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RWDo4B> - On 13 January, a court in Dashoguz Region of northern Turkmenistan jailed 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Kamiljan Ergashov for two years for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. This is the first known conviction and jailing of a conscientious objector so far in 2020. It is the 20th known such conviction since January 2018.

Ergashov is the only bread winner in his family (see below).

Ergashov is appealing against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court, though courts and prisons often obstruct such appeals (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors to military service and their beliefs do not allow them to undertake any kind of activity supporting any country's military. But they willing undertake an alternative, totally civilian form of service, as is the right of all conscientious objectors to military service under international human rights law.

The sentence handed down to Ergashov brings to nine the number of conscientious objectors to compulsory military service known to be serving sentences. All of them are Jehovah's Witnesses (see full list below).

Including two who have been serving jail terms since 2018, nine Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are known - as of 27 January 2020 - to be serving jail terms of between one and four years. Eight of them are imprisoned at the Labour Camp at Seydi in the eastern Lebap Region (see full list below).

Ergashov is still being held at the pre-trial detention prison in the city of Dashoguz, 450 kms (280 miles) north of the capital Ashgabat. He is expected to be transferred to the labour camp at Seydi, where the other eight jailed conscientious objectors are all being held (see below).

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls, for example by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, to introduce a genuine civilian alternative to compulsory military service, to stop prosecuting and punishing conscientious objectors, and to compensate those it has punished.

The man who answered the phone of the deputy head of Dashoguz Region's Military Prosecutor's Office denied that it had any involvement in the prosecution. "We don't know anything" (see below).

Forum 18 could not immediately reach any other officials to find out why Ergashov was jailed and the regime is not willing to introduce a civilian alternative service. In particular, the specialist at the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, did not answer his phone (see below).

the United Nations Human Rights Committee has published 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

Another Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2018 and is awaiting a decision (see below).

Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief – all of them Muslims – are serving far longer jail terms (see below).

### ***No alternative to compulsory military 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.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience generally 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.

Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2 punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime "by means of inflicting injury to oneself, or by simulation of illness, by means of forgery of documents, or other fraudulent ways". Punishment is a jail term of one to four years. The first known use of Article 219, Part 2 to punish a conscientious objector was the case of Azat Ashirov, while Serdar Dovletov's case was the second (see below).

From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. However, jailings resumed in January 2018. Courts jailed 12 conscientious objectors in 2018, two of them for two years and 10 for one year.

### ***Calls for alternative civilian service ignored***

Turkmenistan has ignored repeated international calls to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service. The most recent call came in the latest United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee Decision, published in September.

The Human Rights Committee has issued 13 Decisions in favour of 15 conscientious objectors from Turkmenistan, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. In its most recent such Decision, published on 17 September 2019 (CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013), it ruled that the right to freedom of religion or belief of former conscientious objectors Juma Nazarov, Yadgarbek Sharipov and Atamurad Suvhanov had been violated by their jailing.

Nazarov and Sharipov had been jailed in 2012, and Suvhanov (for the second time) in 2013. The men had lodged their Human Rights Committee appeals in August 2013.

All three men also complained of "inhuman and degrading treatment" after their arrests.

Sharipov told the Human Rights Committee that in "temporary quarantine" detention following sentencing in Dashoguz in December 2012, "he was treated 'terribly, beaten up and humiliated' for his convictions every day during his 10-day detention".

In a 21 March 2013 submission to the Human Rights Committee, Suvhanov's brother noted that when he saw Atamurad two days earlier in the Investigation Prison in Dashoguz, "it was clear to him that his brother was treated 'horribly', was beaten, and 'humiliated for his convictions'. [Suvhanov] also knew that the conversation with his brother has been monitored. He told his brother that he will not be sent to prison colony anytime soon, because the authorities needed to 'break' him."

Neither Sharipov nor Suvhanov lodged official complaints about the beatings "due to the fear of retaliation and further physical abuse by the prison authorities", the UN Committee noted.

However, the Human Rights Committee ruled that the three men had not been able to document their maltreatment sufficiently to allow a finding that their right not to be tortured had been violated.

One of the Human Rights Committee members, French law professor H el ene Tigroudja, argued that the men's prison conditions were enough to justify a finding also that their right not to be tortured had been violated.

Professor Tigroudja pointed out that the Seydi Labour Camp where Nazarov, Sharipov and Suvhanov had served their sentences, "is situated in a desert, with extreme climatic conditions both in winter and in summer, with deplorable hygiene and living conditions, without the possibility of access to such bodies as the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] and, above all, with the complete impossibility for detainees to complain about their treatment without the threat of retaliation". She also noted that sick prisoners – including those who have contracted tuberculosis – are not held separately from other prisoners.

The Human Rights Committee stressed that Turkmenistan is under an obligation to make reparation to Nazarov, Sharipov and Suvhanov for the violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including to "expunge their criminal records and to provide them with adequate compensation. The State party is also under an obligation to avoid similar violations of the Covenant in the future."

The Committee therefore urges Turkmenistan to meet its obligations to avoid similar violations such as by changing the law, "for instance, by providing the possibility of exemption from service or alternative service of a civilian nature".

Another conscientious objector former prisoner, Arslan Begenchov, lodged a case to the UN Human Rights Committee on 20 June 2018 and is awaiting a decision, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. When sentenced in Charjew to one year's imprisonment in January 2018, Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014.

### ***Why no alternative civilian service?***

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not introduce an alternative civilian service and why conscientious objectors who are willing to perform such an alternative service, like the ten Jehovah's Witness young men, continue to be jailed.

The telephones of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev and the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 27 January.

The man who answered the phone at the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production referred Forum 18 to the Commission's specialist, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah. However, his phone also went unanswered on 27 January.

### ***Many prisoners of conscience***

The nine 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 in July 2018. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovdan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

More than 60 Muslims from in and around the eastern city of 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 at 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.

### ***Two-year Dashoguz jailing***

A Military Conscription Office in the northern Dashoguz Region summoned Kamiljan Ergeshovich Ergashov (born 27 June 2001) to perform compulsory military service. He told the Office that he could not perform military service because of his religious beliefs and said he was ready to perform a fully civilian alternative service.

Ergashov – who is from the village of Shohrat in Niyazov District of Dashoguz Region, just a few kilometers from the border with Uzbekistan - is the sole bread winner in his family.

Prosecutors brought a criminal case against Ergashov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. The case was then handed to Niyazov District Court.

On 13 January 2020, a Judge at Niyazov District Court convicted Ergashov and sentenced him to two years' imprisonment, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The man who answered the phone of the deputy head of Dashoguz Region's Military Prosecutor's Office denied that it had any involvement in the prosecution. "We don't know anything," he told Forum 18 on 27 January. He then put the phone down.

Ergashov has signed his appeal against his conviction to Dashoguz Regional Court, though courts and prisons often obstruct such appeals. The chancellery of Dashoguz Regional Court refused to tell Forum 18 on 27 January if the court has yet received Ergashov's appeal.

Ergashov is still being held in the Temporary Detention Prison (DZ-E/7) in Dashoguz Region. He is expected to be transferred to the labour camp at Seydi, where the other eight jailed conscientious objectors are all being held.

### ***Appeal rejected***

A court has rejected the appeal of the last conscientious objector jailed in 2019. On 3 December 2019, a panel of three judges of Mary Regional Court, chaired by Gurbandurdy Annayev, rejected the appeal by Serdar Nurmammedovich Dovletov against his three-year jail term, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Dovletov was not in court for the appeal hearing, but the Court handed the decision to his wife Surya, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

On 12 November 2019, Bayramali City Court jailed Dovletov for three years for "fraudulently" evading military service. The Military Conscription Office had called him up although he suffers from a chronic stomach ulcer that needed medical attention, as three doctors testified at his trial. The investigator accused Dovletov of referring to his religious beliefs "because he did not find any other reasons to fraudulently deviate from military service".

### ***Eight jailed conscientious objectors in Seydi Labour Camp***

Ergashov's jailing brings to nine the number of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors known - as of 27 January - to be serving jail terms. Eight of them are imprisoned at the harsh Seydi Labour Camp in the desert in Lebap Region.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

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

In his complaint to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, former Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Aibek Salayev complained that conditions in the Seydi Labour Camp where he was held were "inhuman".

Salayev noted that the Camp was "known for its overcrowdedness, harsh climatic conditions, scarce supplies of food, medication and personal hygiene products, and for tuberculosis, skin diseases, its very high mortality rate, and physical abuse". Officials also threatened him with rape in the Camp.

The UN Human Rights Committee ruled that the Turkmen authorities had violated the rights of Salayev and another Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Vladimir Nuryllayev. The UN published the Decision (CCPR/C/125/D/2448/2014) on 18 April 2019.

### ***Completed jail terms***

The two most recent conscientious objectors to be freed at the end of their sentences were:

- Gurbangylych Muhammetgulyyev, freed on 28 November 2019 after completing a one year ordinary regime labour camp sentence;
- Azamatjan Narkulyev, freed on 7 January 2020 after completing a one year ordinary regime labour camp sentence.

### ***List of known jailed conscientious objectors***

Nine conscientious objectors to compulsory military service (listed below) – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are known to be serving prison sentences. Six were jailed under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"), Ashirov and Dovletov under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2, and Atahanov under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2:

- 1) Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev; born 22 June 1999; sentenced 26 June 2018 Turkmenbashi City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; no appeal to Balkan Region Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 2) Eziz Dovletmuradovich Atabayev; born 15 March 1998; sentenced 19 December 2018 Dashoguz City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 15 January 2019 Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 3) Muhammetali Charygeldiyevich Saparmyradov; born 11 November 1995; sentenced 19 March 2019 Bayramaly City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; no appeal to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.



- 4) Bahtiyar Amirjanovich Atahanov; born 17 June 2000; sentenced 15 July 2019 Tejen City Court under Criminal Code Article 344, Part 2; appeal rejected 20 August 2019 Ahal Regional Court; four years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 5) Azat Gurbanmuhammedovich Ashirov, born 7 January 1999; sentenced 31 July 2019 Abadan District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appeal rejected 3 September 2019 Ashgabat City Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 6) David Andronikovich Petrosov, born 15 May 2001; sentenced 30 September 2019 Ashgabat's Kopetdag District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 7) Selim Yolamanovich Taganov, born 22 March 2001; sentenced 3 October 2019 Ashgabat's Berkararlyk District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal rejected 29 October 2019 Ashgabat City Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 8) Serdar Nurmuhammedovich Dovletov, born 2 December 1993; sentenced 12 November 2019 Bayramali City Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 2; appealed rejected 3 December 2019 Mary Regional Court; three years' ordinary regime labour camp.
- 9) Kamiljan Ergeshovich Ergashov, born 27 June 2001; sentenced 13 January 2020 Niyazov District Court under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1; appeal lodged to Dashoguz Regional Court; two years' ordinary regime labour camp.

---

## **Raids, searches, fines, threats, beatings, headscarf bans**

***Protestant women celebrating Christmas are the latest victims of police raids on worship meetings. Officers searched the home, seized telephones, forced the women to write statements and took photos and fingerprints. Officials often summon and threaten people known to be religious (including men who attend mosque, women who wear headscarves, and Jehovah's Witnesses). Eight Jehovah's Witnesses were fined in 2019.***

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (16.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2U7DDwc> - Police raided a Christmas gathering of Protestant women in a village in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebap Region on 26 December 2019. Officers searched the home, seized telephones and questioned the women at the police station. In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints.

It appears that none of the Protestants have yet been fined (see below).

Although this is the only known raid on Protestant Christians in 2019, throughout the year police also raided Jehovah's Witness meetings, interrogated and threatened individuals and brought cases to court. Incidents included police physical violence, intimidation, house searches (often without a warrant) and seizures of personal belongings. "Officers harass, interrogate and pressure Jehovah's Witnesses, even threatening to 'arrange an accident' if they will not renounce their faith," they told Forum 18 (see below).

At least 8 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been fined several days' average wages while one of them was also jailed for three days on accusations of hooliganism (see below).

Officials forcibly took some Jehovah's Witnesses from their workplace or homes for interrogation, "all in an effort to pressure them to abandon their faith" (see below).

One Jehovah's Witness fined in 2019 was Arslan Begenchov. Police summoned him just weeks after he completed a one-year prison term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience (see below).

In late 2019, authorities in Mary Region east of Ashgabat stepped up a campaign against women who choose to wear the hijab headscarf. While earlier it was almost impossible for women with state jobs to wear a hijab, the ban was then extended to women on the streets and at markets (see below).

Police and secret police officers have long threatened women who wear the hijab, men who have beards, and those who regularly attend prayers at the mosque (see below).

An individual returning to Turkmenistan through Ashgabat Airport was stopped after being suspected of travelling abroad for religious purposes, beaten on the head after refusing to allow a search of electronic devices (which police seized and searched) and was kept under surveillance for the following weeks (see below).

No official has been prepared to answer Forum 18's questions on why Turkmenistan does not implement its binding international human rights law obligations on freedom of religion and belief, and instead punishes individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion and belief (see below).

### ***Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief***

Turkmenistan imposes tight state controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief. Only approved activity in approved locations by approved religious communities are allowed. Unregistered religious activity is banned and punishable.

All religious literature is under tight state control and unapproved distribution of such literature is punishable. Sharing of faith is banned and punishable.

The regime arbitrarily denies registration to communities it does not like. Only mosques subject to the state-controlled Muftiate (led by Chief Mufti Yalkab Hojagulyyev) are allowed to exist. Only a small number of non-Muslim communities are allowed to register, while many (particularly Protestant communities outside the capital Ashgabat, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses) have had registration applications rejected.

Jehovah's Witnesses say that since September 2018, government interference with their religious activity has increased. They complain of police harassment and threats, police interference with the public manifestation of belief, government denial of the right to possess religious material and government denial of registration. They also complain that the international Jehovah's Witness website, [www.jw.org](http://www.jw.org), is blocked in Turkmenistan.

### ***No answers***

The man who answered the phone on 16 January of the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev hung up as soon as Forum 18 began introducing itself.

Ishan Orazov, who works in the office of Deputy Foreign Minister Vepa Hajiyeu, told Forum 18 on 16 January he was unable to transfer the call to Hajiyeu. Hajiyeu often defends Turkmenistan's human rights record in the United Nations human rights bodies, and has apparently been part of the process of deciding which religious communities are given state permission to exist. He also spoke at a November 2019 Ashgabat roundtable allegedly on freedom of conscience (see below). Orazov declined to comment and asked for questions to be sent to Hajiyeu in writing.

Forum 18 asked Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyeu in writing the same day why individuals continue to face punishment for exercising freedom of religion or belief. He was also asked: why individuals face police and secret police interrogation, threats and torture, fines or jailing (often with long sentences); why the state bans the exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission; why the state censors religious literature and websites; and why conscientious objectors are jailed and why no alternative service has been introduced. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Ashgabat.

The telephone of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 16 January.

### ***Raids on worship meetings***

A group of Protestant women gathered to celebrate Christmas in the evening of 26 December 2019 in a home in a village in the eastern Lebap Region, fellow Protestants told Forum 18. Police arrived and searched the home and seized the women's phones before taking the women to the police station. They were held there for some time for interrogation.

In early January 2020, police summoned the women one by one. "They questioned them, forced them to write statements, took fingerprints and photos, threatened them and then returned their phones, before letting them go," one Protestant told Forum 18.

None of the Protestant women appear to have been fined.

On 2 October 2019, police officers raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness in Seydi, Lebap Region, during a religious meeting, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Officers took a group of attendees to the police station, where they interrogated and photographed them.

The police officers twisted the hands of the host, took him back to his house, searched his property, and seized his personal literature, his laptop, and his daughters' exercise books. The Jehovah's Witnesses, including the young children, were detained at the police station for six hours, from 9:00 pm till 3:00 am.

On 24 October 2019, police in Ashgabat raided a Jehovah's Witness religious meeting. Officers took all those present to the police station, interrogated them and photographed them.

The man who answered the phone of the head of Ashgabat's Police 6th Department, which supposedly counters serious crime but also punishes the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, put the phone down on 16 January as soon as Forum 18 began asking about raids, detentions and house searches.

### ***Punished for being religious***

Police and secret police officers often summon, interrogate or threaten individuals known to be religious. Officers often seize property and arrange for individuals to be fined in court.

Officials in 2019 often charged individual Jehovah's Witnesses under Administrative Code Article 76 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), particularly Part 1. In earlier years, members of other religious communities have been fined under Article 76.

Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducted religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance" with a fine on individuals of 1 to 2 base units, on officials of 2 to 5 base units and on legal organisations of 5 to 10 base units (each base unit is 100 Manats).

Each 100 Manats is equivalent to two days' average wage for those in formal work. However, for pensioners or others without a formal job, fines can represent a severe burden.

On 5 February 2019, a Jehovah's Witness in Balkanabat, Balkan Region, was summoned to the office of the head of her daughter's school, School No. 12. In the office, a police officer criticised her religious beliefs and threatened to fine her 3,000 Manats (about six weeks' average wages for those in formal work). The officer ordered the mother to stop teaching her child her religious beliefs and photographed the mother and daughter.

On 8 February 2019, a village official in Charjew District, Lebap Region, alleged that a complaint had been received and escorted a Jehovah's Witness to the police station, where several law enforcement officers were waiting, including a district inspector and a criminal investigation officer. The officers interrogated the Jehovah's Witness and then took him to his home and searched it, seizing personal belongings. They took him back to the police station and then threatened to push a pole with the national flag attached down his throat in an attempt to force him to kiss the flag. On 15 March, Charjew District Court fined the man 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1, and his computer and phone were confiscated. The Jehovah's Witness filed a complaint against the officers, but received no response.

Telephones at Charjew District Police went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 16 January.

On 18 February 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat, Lebap Region, raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property, seized her personal literature and passport and escorted her to the police station, where three police officers interrogated her. On 15 March, a police officer entered her home through a window and forcibly took her to Turkmenabat Court. The court fined her 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1. On 16 April, she filed a complaint with Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office against the officers' actions. The Prosecutor's Office responded that the officers had committed no offence. On 25 April, she filed a complaint with Lebap Regional Court. She received no response.

On 23 February 2019, police in Charjew District, Lebap Region, summoned Arslan Begenchov (a conscientious objector who finished his prison term in January 2019) to Charjew District Police Station and questioned him about his religious beliefs. After interrogation, the officer took Begenchov to his home, seized his electronic tablet and personal notebook and took him back to the police station. On 10 May, Charjew District Court fined Begenchov 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1. On 20

May, he appealed against the decision. On 24 May, Charjew District Court responded, claiming that he had missed the deadline for lodging an appeal.

On 11 March 2019, an Interior Ministry employee and another man forcibly took a Jehovah's Witness from his Ashgabat workplace to Kopetdag District Police Station No. 1 and reported that he was suspected of being a thief. At the station, officers questioned the Jehovah's Witness about his religious beliefs and seized his electronic tablet. On 12 March, Kopetdag District Court sentenced the man to three days' imprisonment under Administrative Code Article 345 ("Petty hooliganism"). On 15 March, the Witness was summoned to the Department of Religious Affairs for questioning. On 4 April, Kopetdag District Court fined him 200 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1 for distributing religious material.

On 26 June 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat raided the home of an elderly Jehovah's Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property and seized her personal literature. That same day, the woman filed a complaint with Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office. The Prosecutor's Office later responded that the arguments in the complaint were not confirmed.

On 8 August 2019, a female Jehovah's Witness doctor was called to a meeting at Dashoguz Regional Health Administration, along with several managers. At the meeting, a police officer shouted at the doctor, claiming that she associated with a "sect" and carried on a "propaganda campaign" among residents. The officer interrogated her, photographed her, and threatened to "arrange an accident" if she would not renounce her faith.

On 26 August 2019, Ashgabat police summoned a Jehovah's Witness to the police station. The officers interrogated her, photographed her, searched her belongings and seized her personal literature. That same day, police officers arrived at the home of another elderly Jehovah's Witness, interrogated her about her religious beliefs and searched her home without a search warrant. On 4 October, Kopetdag District Court ordered that both women's personal literature be confiscated and imposed fines of 200 Manats and 100 Manats under Administrative Code Article 76, Part 1.

On 13 September 2019, Ashgabat police summoned a Jehovah's Witness to the police station. Police officers interrogated her about her religious beliefs and threatened her with a search and imprisonment.

On 1 October 2019, police officers in Charjew District, Lebap Region, detained the mother of a Jehovah's Witness and interrogated her for three hours. The officers seized her passport, saying that they would return it to her only if her son came to police station. They also threatened to imprison her son.

### ***Intrusive questioning for praying regularly***

In September 2019, Mary Region secret police officers summoned a 50-year-old man "because he was religious and prays the namaz", Radio Free Europe's correspondent in Mary noted on 18 September 2019. "I told them I pray the namaz. They said they know about that," the man told the correspondent. Officers were also interested to know if Muslims drink alcohol or soft drinks.

Other questions secret police officers asked local Muslims, especially those who pray regularly at the mosque, were: "Where did you learn to pray?"; "What books do you read?"; "Where did you get your prayer books?"; and "Who are your friends?"

"I told them I bought the prayer books at the market," one Muslim man told RFE's correspondent, "received religious education by attending the mosque and listening to other believers talking, and that most of my friends are my former schoolmates, but they don't pray the namaz."

However, the secret police summoned this Muslim again. "At the second interrogation they asked me who I get together with to pray the namaz in my free time. I said I don't get together with anyone to pray the namaz. But they asked if I don't get together with anyone else, what do I do. I said that I repair houses." Officers also wanted to know if the man's wife and children also pray.

One officer then said they had no more questions, and gave the Muslim his phone number asking him to call if he learns of anyone "acting suspiciously from a religious perspective".

### ***Questioned, punished for sharing faith***

Individuals who share their faith with others risk detention and possible punishment. However, Jehovah's Witnesses say that in 2019, there were fewer incidents where police detained individuals while they were talking to others about their beliefs.

Muslims too have been seen in Ashgabat sharing their faith on the streets, Turkmen.news noted on 17 October 2019.

On 19 March 2019, police officers in Turkmenabat, Lebap Region, detained two Jehovah's Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them and seized their electronic devices. On 20 March, Turkmenabat City Court fined each of them 500 Manats and ordered that their phones be confiscated. On 9 April, Lebap Regional Court upheld the decision.

On 6 July 2019, police officers in Bayramaly, Mary Region, detained two Jehovah's Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them, and threatened to imprison them for 15 days.

On 24 September 2019, Ashgabat police escorted a Jehovah's Witness to the police station after she spoke about her faith with a woman. At the station, the officers photographed her. On 24 October, she filed a complaint with Ashgabat Prosecutor's Office against the officers' actions. She received no response.

### ***Campaign against hijabs steps up***

In early December 2019, the authorities particularly in Mary Region east of Ashgabat stepped up their campaign against women wearing the hijab headscarf, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 6 December 2019. Almost no women were seen on the streets or in the markets wearing a hijab.

Although the local authorities had long imposed a ban on women wearing the hijab, the ban had mainly affected women in state jobs or in businesses. However, in late 2019 the ban was extended to all public places.

The new ban had been given verbally, and police then questioned and threatened women they caught still wearing the hijab.

"If women wanted to continue working, they should not wear the hijab," Radio Free Europe's correspondent noted, "otherwise they'll be approached and questioned. One

woman said she had been asked if she is a Wahhabi. When she denied this, saying that she was a Muslim, the state security officer questioning her responded that wearing a hijab is not obligatory."

The authorities in Mary Region and elsewhere have long waged campaigns against men wearing beards.

"State security officers summon for questioning men for having a beard, and women for wearing a hijab," Radio Free Europe's correspondent added. "In addition, men working in state institutions can be sacked for praying the namaz. Because of this, many of them – including those holding leading state positions – stop praying the namaz out of fear of losing their jobs."

### ***Intrusive search, torture on return to Turkmenistan***

In autumn 2019, officials detained an individual returning to Turkmenistan through Ashgabat Airport because a police officer claimed that the individual travelled to different countries for religious purposes, people close to the individual told Forum 18.

Without a search warrant, the officer demanded that the individual give him all electronic devices to be searched. When the individual refused, the police officer beat the individual on the head. After this, officers searched the individual's bags and flash drives. Police then released the individual, but maintained surveillance for several weeks.

In December 2018, security personnel at Ashgabat Airport detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours. She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan.

### ***Instead of human rights a roundtable***

On 25 November 2019 a roundtable allegedly on freedom of conscience was held in the state-run Institute of State, Law and Democracy in Ashgabat, according to the Foreign Ministry website.

Attendees included Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyev, the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Gurbannazarova, and other officials from the Interior Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the Religious Affairs Department of the Cabinet of Ministers, and what were claimed to be "representatives of various confessions and religious organisations active in Turkmenistan".

Neither Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyev nor Human Rights Ombudsperson Gurbannazarova has answered Forum 18's questions about why Turkmenistan does not implement its binding international human rights law obligations on freedom of religion and belief, and instead punishes individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion and belief.

---

## **Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses**

JW.ORG (01.01.2020) - Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan are not able to worship freely. Since September 2018, there has been an increase in government interference with the Witnesses' religious activity. The Witnesses experience the following violations of their basic religious freedoms:

## ***Government denial of registration***

As of December 31, 2019, nine young Witnesses were unjustly imprisoned in Turkmenistan for their conscientious objection to military service.

Turkmenistan has no provision for an alternative to military service and has taken a harsh stance towards conscientious objectors. During the reporting period, seven young Witness men were sentenced to imprisonment. Bahtiyar Atahanov was forcibly taken to a military unit and later sentenced to four years in prison. Other cases are pending with the Prosecutor's Office.

## ***Law enforcement authorities continue to mistreat Jehovah's Witnesses***

Authorities have intimidated and harassed the Witnesses by searching their homes without a warrant, seizing personal belongings, forcibly taking them from their workplace or homes for interrogation and even beating some of them—all in an effort to pressure them to abandon their faith.

## ***Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom***

### **Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service**

Turkmenistan imprisons young Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. The government refuses to recognize the right of conscientious objection despite calls to comply with international standards. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses who cannot in good conscience support the military are imprisoned.

In 2015 and 2016, the U.N. Human Rights Committee (CCPR) issued ten decisions against Turkmenistan in response to applications filed by individual Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned as conscientious objectors. These decisions obligated Turkmenistan to provide alternative civilian service, Jehovah's Witnesses outside the military sphere and not under military command. In these decisions, the CCPR reprimanded Turkmenistan for prosecuting and imprisoning young Witnesses for conscientious objection in violation of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Covenant). The CCPR also concluded that prison officials tortured some of the Witnesses, as defined by Article 7 of the Covenant. (1)

In April 2017, the CCPR repeated its concern about Turkmenistan's "continued failure to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service and the repeated prosecution and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses refusing to perform compulsory military service." It called on Turkmenistan to "revise its legislation without undue delay" and to "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." (2)

In 2019, the CCPR issued another decision against Turkmenistan in response to a joint application filed by three Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned as conscientious objectors. The CCPR once again agreed that the Witnesses' rights had been violated when they were imprisoned and prosecuted because of their refusal to perform compulsory military service, a clear violation of Article 18 of the Covenant (3).



Presently, nine young Witness men are imprisoned as conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan. All except three are prosecuted under Article 219(1) of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan (CCT) for the 'absence of legal ground for exemption from military service.'

**(1) Mekan Annayev**, 19 years old, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on June 26, 2018, as a conscientious objector. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(2) Azamatyan Narkuliyev**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on January 7, 2019, as a conscientious objector. He appealed to the Dänew District Court to request another medical examination because he is in poor health. The court denied his appeal, and he was severely beaten by officers of the detention center and by prison guards when he tried to file a cassation appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(3) Eziz Atabayev**, 20 years old, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on December 19, 2018. On January 15, 2019, the Dashoguz Regional Court denied his appeal and left the city court's sentence unchanged. On July 17, 2019, the Supreme Court refused to consider his appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(4) Saparmuradov Muhammetali**, 23 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on March 19, 2019, as a conscientious objector despite his poor health. The court did not provide a copy of the decision. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(5) Bahtiyar Atahanov**, 19 years old, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on July 15, 2019, for his conscientious objection. On April 20, he was sent to the military unit of Tejen even though he provided a statement explaining his willingness to perform alternative service. He refused to wear a military uniform and was charged under Article 344(2) of the CCT (soldier evading duty—carrying a penalty of up to seven years' imprisonment). Appeals and a formal complaint met with no success. On August 20, 2019, the Court of Ahal denied his appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(6) Azat Ashirov**, 20 years old, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on July 31, 2019, for his conscientious objection, even though he is in poor health and both his mother and one brother are disabled. He was charged under Article 219(2) of the CCT ('fraudulently evading military service'). His appeal is pending consideration. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(7) David Petrosov**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on September 30, 2019, for his conscientious objection. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LBE/12.

**(8) Selim Taganov**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on October 3, 2019, for his conscientious objection. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(9) Serdar Dovletov**, 26 years old, was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment on November 12, 2019, for his conscientious objection, even though he suffers from a serious disease which previously enabled him to be issued draft deferments. He was sentenced under Article 219(2) of the CCT ('fraudulently evading military service'). He is in the MR/E14 Detention Center in the city of Mary.

### **Internet Censorship**

JW.ORG: The official website of Jehovah's Witnesses, Turkmenistan. [www.jw.org](http://www.jw.org) is currently blocked throughout.

## ***Interference With Manifestation of Religious Belief***

### **Police Action Against Jehovah's Witnesses**

During the reporting period, there were numerous incidents of police brutality, intimidation and searches of homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Law enforcement officers harass, interrogate and pressure the Witnesses, even threatening to 'arrange an accident' if they will not renounce their faith. Officials charge the Witnesses under Article 76(1) of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan (ACT) for the 'production, import, export, distribution of religious literature.' The following are a few examples of police harassment:

**(1) Dashoguz.** On November 8, 2018, a local police inspector and an agent of the MNS arrived at the home of a Witness and forcibly escorted him to the local police station. The MNS agent demanded that the Witness write a statement promising that he would no longer communicate with Jehovah's Witnesses. Following this, the officer telephoned the Witness on numerous occasions, asking to meet with him. On November 18, 2018, the MNS agent went to the Witness' home and threatened to 'arrange an accident' if he refused to abandon his religious beliefs. The Witness filed a complaint with the General Prosecutor's Office of Turkmenistan and the Institute of State, Law and Democracy. On February 28, 2019, he received a response from the Prosecutor's Office of Dashoguz stating that no violations had been found.

**(2) Çärjew District, Lebap Region.** On February 8, 2019, a village official alleged that a complaint had been received and escorted a male Witness to the police station, where several law enforcement officers were waiting, including a district inspector and a criminal investigation officer. The officers interrogated the Witness and then took him to his home, searched his house and seized personal belongings. They took him back to the police station and then threatened to push a pole with the national flag attached down his throat in an attempt to force him to kiss the flag. On March 15, 2019, he was summoned to the Çärjew District Court and fined \$55 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the (ACT), and his personal computer and phone were confiscated. The Witness filed a complaint against the law enforcement officers, but he has not received a response.

**(3) Ashgabat.** On February 15, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were peacefully talking to others about their beliefs and took them to the Berkaralyk District Police Department for interrogation.

**(4) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On February 18, 2019, law enforcement officers raided the home of a female Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property, seized her personal literature and passport and escorted her to the police station, where three police officers interrogated her. On March 15, 2019, a law enforcement officer entered her home through a window and forcibly took her to the Turkmenabat Court. The court fined her \$55 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the ACT. On April 16, 2019, she filed a complaint with the Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office against the actions of the law enforcement officers. The Prosecutor's Office responded and stated that the officers had not committed an offence. On April 25, 2019, she filed a complaint with the Lebap Regional Court. She has not received a response.

**(5) Çärjew District, Lebap Region.** On February 23, 2019, police summoned Arslan Begenchov (a conscientious objector who finished his prison term in January 2019) to the Çärjew District Police Department and questioned him about his religious beliefs. After the interrogation, the officer took Mr. Begenchov to his home, seized his electronic tablet and personal notebook and escorted him back to the police department. On May 10, 2019, the Çärjew District Court fined Mr. Begenchov \$56 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan. On May 20, 2019, he appealed the decision. On

May 24, 2019, the Çärjew District Court responded, claiming that he had missed the filing deadline.

**(6) Ashgabat.** On March 11, 2019, an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and another man forcibly took a male Witness from his workplace to the Kopetdag District Police Station No. 1 and reported that he was suspected of being a thief. At the station, officers questioned the Witness about his religious beliefs and seized his electronic tablet. On March 12, the Kopetdag District Court sentenced the Witness to three days' imprisonment under Article 345 of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan (petty hooliganism). On March 15, the Witness was summoned to the Department of Religious Affairs for questioning. On April 4, 2019, he was fined \$55 U.S. by the Kopetdag District Court for distributing religious material.

**(7) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On March 19, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them and seized their electronic devices. On March 20, 2019, the Turkmenabat City Court fined each of them \$138 U.S. and ordered that their phones be confiscated. On April 9, 2019, the Lebap Regional Court upheld the decision.

**(8) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On June 26, 2019, police officers raided the home of an elderly female Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property and seized her personal literature. That same day, the Witness filed a complaint with the Prosecutor's Office of Turkmenabat. The Prosecutor's Office later responded that the arguments in the complaint were not confirmed.

**(9) Baýramaly, Mary Region.** On July 6, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them, and threatened to imprison them for 15 days.

**(10) Dashoguz.** On August 8, 2019, a female Witness doctor was called to a meeting at the Regional Health Administration, along with several persons from health management. At the meeting, a police officer in attendance shouted at her, claimed that she associated with a sect, and that she carried on a propaganda campaign among the residents. The officer interrogated her, photographed her, and threatened to 'arrange an accident.'

**(11) Ashgabat.** On August 26, 2019, police summoned a female Witness to the police station. The officers interrogated her, photographed her, searched her belongings, and seized her personal literature. That same day, police officers arrived at the home of another elderly female Witness, interrogated her about her religious beliefs and searched her home without a search warrant. On October 4, 2019, the Kopetdag District Court ordered that the women's personal literature be confiscated and imposed fines of \$57 U.S. and \$28.60 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the ACT.

**(12) Ashgabat.** On September 13, 2019, police summoned a female Witness to the police station. Police officers interrogated her about her religious beliefs and threatened her with a search and imprisonment.

**(13) Ashgabat.** On September 24, 2019, police escorted a female Witness to the police station after she spoke about her faith with a woman. At the station, the officers photographed her. On October 24, 2019, the Witness filed a complaint with the Ashgabat Prosecutor's Office against the actions of the law enforcement officers. She has not received a response.

**(14) Serdarabat District, Lebap Region.** On October 1, 2019, police officers detained the mother of a male Witness and interrogated her for three hours. The officers seized

her passport, saying that they would only return it to her if her son came to police station. They also threatened to imprison her son.

**(15) Seýdi, Lebap Region.** On October 2, 2019, police officers raided the home of a Witness during a peaceful religious meeting. The officers escorted a group of the Witnesses to the police station. At the station, the officers interrogated and photographed the group. The police officers twisted the hands of the host, took him back to his house, searched his property, and seized his personal literature, his laptop, and his daughters' exercise books. The Witnesses, including the little children, were detained at the police station for six hours, from 9:00 p.m. till 3:00 a.m.

**(16) Ashgabat.** On October 24, 2019, police raided a peaceful religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses. The officers escorted all in attendance to the police station, interrogated them, and photographed them.

**(17) Ashgabat.** On October 28, 2019, officials detained a male Witness at a migration post at the international airport in Ashgabat because a police officer asserted that the Witness travelled to different countries for religious conventions. Without providing a search warrant, the officer demanded that the Witness give him all his electronic devices for a police search. When the Witness refused, the police officer beat him in the head. After this, officers searched the bags and flash drives of the Witness.

### ***Societal Abuses and Discrimination***

#### **Dissemination of Defamatory Material**

Between September 2018 and May 2019, unknown individuals distributed leaflets in Russian and Turkmen containing defamatory statements about the Witnesses. Not only did these leaflets include slanderous material designed to incite hatred but they also targeted individual Witnesses and included personal data, photographs, names, birth dates and addresses. Officials have taken no action to stop these distributions.

#### **Parents Pressured Not to Teach Their Religious Beliefs to Their Children**

**Balkanabat, Balkan Region.** On 5 February 2019, a Witness mother was called to the office of the principal of her daughter's school, School No. 12. In the office, a law enforcement officer criticized her religious beliefs and threatened to fine her \$832 U.S. The officer ordered the mother to stop teaching her child her religious beliefs and photographed the mother and daughter.

### ***Complaints submitted by Jehovah's Witnesses pending with the CCPR***

Begenchov v. Turkmenistan, filed June 20, 2018, on issue of conscientious objection

Hemdemov v. Turkmenistan, filed August 15, 2016, arrest and detention for "illegal" religious activities

Annamuradov et al v. Turkmenistan, filed November 29, 2018, arrests and fines for "illegal" religious activities and possessing "illegal" religious literature

### ***Positive Developments***

On February 13, 2019, 55-year-old Bahram Hemdemov was released from prison in Turkmenistan after serving his full four-year sentence in Seydi prison (LB-E/12). He is

now reunited with his wife, Gulzira, and their four children. Mr. Hemdemov was arrested on March 14, 2015, simply for holding a peaceful religious meeting at his home in a suburb of Turkmenabad, and he was convicted by the Lebap Regional Court on May 19, 2015.

During the reporting period, there were fewer incidents where police detained the Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs.

### ***Meetings With Officials***

From November 2018 through March 2019, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses made several attempts to meet with representatives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ombudsman. All requests to meet remain unanswered.

In February 2019, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses met with foreign embassies.

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses were able to hold one meeting, on May 28, 2019, with an official from the religious affairs department in Ashgabat. The official declined to express an opinion and recommended approaching the Representative for Religious Issues.

Attempts by an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses to meet with a representative of the country's leadership were unsuccessful. All requests to meet remained unanswered.

### ***Religious Freedom Objectives***

Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the government of Turkmenistan to:

- (1) Release all Witness conscientious objectors who are imprisoned for their deeply held beliefs, including Bahtiyar Atahanov, who was unjustly imprisoned as a serviceman evading duty
- (2) Allow an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses to meet with the President or members of his cabinet
- (3) Recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide an alternative civilian service conforming to international standards
- (4) Grant full registration to Jehovah's Witnesses
- (5) Stop interference with their worship and public manifestation of belief
- (6) Cease threats, illegal searches of Witnesses' private homes, and seizures of personal items
- (7) Allow the Witnesses to legally import Bibles and Bible-based literature and grant access to their official website, [jw.org](http://jw.org).

### ***For more information***

Please contact Jarrod Lopes at the Office of Public Information for Jehovah's Witnesses.

## **Footnotes**

1. Zafar Abdullayev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2218/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/113/D/2218/2012.
  - Navruz Nasyrlyayev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2219/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2219/2012.
  - Mamatkarim Aminov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2220/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2220/2012.
  - Mahmud Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2221/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2221/2012.
  - Ahmet Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2222/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2222/2012.
  - Sunnet Japparow v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2223/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2223/2012.
  - Dovran Matyakubov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2224/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2224/2012.
  - Akmurad Nurjanov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2225/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2225/2012.
  - Shandurdy Uchetov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2226/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2226/2012.
  - Akmurat Yegendurdyyev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2227/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2227/2012.
2. Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Turkmenistan, 20 April 2017, CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2, paras. 40, 41.
3. Nazarov et al v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2302/2013, UN Doc. CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013.