



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/2006/NGO/80
2 March 2006

ENGLISH ONLY

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sixty-second session
Item 11 (e) of the provisional agenda

**CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF:
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE**

**Written statement* submitted by the International League for Human Rights (ILHR), a
non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 February 2006]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Statement on Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan

The International League for Human Rights wishes to express its serious concern about the perilous state of religious freedom and freedom of association in Turkmenistan.

Since 1997, Turkmenistan has outlawed all faiths except for Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church.

A formal ban on “unregistered religious activities” was codified in March 2003. Since then the government has eased the restrictions on the various religious groups by reforming the corresponding law. However, what the Government of Turkmenistan lacks in formal rules it make up for with informal enforcement.

After the decriminalization of “unregistered” religious expression in May 2004, governmental officials have threatened, raided and sometimes arrested members of independent religious communities. Members of one exceptionally vulnerable religious group, Jehovah’s Witnesses, have been threatened with physical violence including rape. The Baptist community in Dashoguz has had Bibles confiscated in several police raids as well as threats made against individual members.

Despite the formal relaxation of regulations requiring religious organizations to register with the government, most organizations continue to face serious problems. The Baptist church encountered several last-minute obstacles. Although the Adventists have legally registered, they still lack a place to worship legally because their old church has been demolished by the authorities in November 1999. Others religious group have feared governmental retaliation against their members and thus are reluctant to submit to the registration procedures.

In its concluding observations released following its 67th session, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted with concern that in Turkmenistan, “members of religious groups do not fully enjoy their rights to freedom of religion and that some religious confessions remain unregistered.”

Unregistered religious minority groups are forced to meet in secrecy, often in private homes, which are subject to police raids. President Niyazov has gone through great pains to bolster his “cult of personality,” by reforming the educational system and including his quasi-spiritual guide *Rukhnama*, as the principle textbook used by all schoolchildren.

Pressure from officials on Muslims and the Orthodox to accept the cult of personality is reportedly especially strong in the north-eastern Dashoguz region, where ethnic Uzbeks make up about half the population. The authorities have forced imams to place the Turkmen flag above mosque entrances and every sermon delivered by imams has to begin with a eulogy to the “Turkmenbashi” (“Father of the Turkmen”, as Niyazov insists on being called). A copy of the *Rukhnama* is placed prominently at the entrance to every

mosque and believers have to touch it as if it were a sacred object. Similar instructions have been given to Sunni Muslim mosques elsewhere and to Russian Orthodox churches.

On March 2, 2004, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, the former chief mufti and deputy chairman of the Gengeshi (Council) for religious affairs, was imprisoned, convicted of treason and sentenced for 22 years. We feel the chief motivation for this sentence to be his Uzbek ethnicity and his opposition toward President Niyazov's attempts to gain more control over the Muslim community.

In addition to the persecution of the chief mufti, many imams are believed to be in internal exile. Religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan have been harshly treated, regularly beaten, threatened with homosexual rape, and in one case apparently treated with psychotropic drugs.

Religious minority prisoners - including Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists - have not benefited under successive presidential prisoner amnesties, as they refused to confess their guilt and swear the national oath of allegiance to the President and country on a copy of the Koran in the local mosque. Recently, there have been reports of instances when regional government representatives, in collusion with the police and family members, have pressured Christian converts of Turkmen ethnicity to renounce their faith and return to Islam.

To date, the Turkmen government has persistently refused to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief. In her September 2005 report to the UN General Assembly, the Rapporteur, Mrs. Asma Jahangir, reported that she had that year "reminded" the Turkmen government of the 2003 request for permission to visit the country and the Uzbek government of her 2004 request. In response to both her reminders, she reported the following: "No reply." Mrs. Jahangir's latest request also fell on dead ears. According to *Forum 18*, a prominent NGO working on the issue of religious freedom, Turkmen officials have been "unable to say when the Special Rapporteur's requests to inspect the religious freedom situation in their country will be met." On January 24, Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov told Forum 18 through an aide that he was "too busy" to respond to the question.

The League appeals to the Commission to urge the government of Turkmenistan to abide by international standards of freedom of religion and norms of human rights.

Some of the concrete steps Turkmenistan should take include:

- extend an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief;
- follow through in practice on the formal religious freedoms which have been established in law in accordance with international standards. The government

should form procedures to allow organizations to practice their religion without persecution;

- make public its sentencing of Ibadullah and all other religious prisoners of conscience and conduct a complete and impartial investigation into the charges made against him by ordering a retrial with full access granted to domestic and international observers.
