



## HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

# Testimony :: Hon. Sam Brownback

Commissioner - Helsinki Commission

Turkmenistan continues to engage in numerous infringements of religious liberty which I would like to briefly describe. There is a continuing crackdown on religious groups, including the actual bull-dozing of a church to the ground by the government, the deportation of peaceful missionaries, and the arrests and incarceration of people because of their faith. Given this troubling litany, now is the time for the government of Turkmenistan to enter into a new era of tolerance for religious minorities.

In this era of dramatic change throughout the former Soviet Union, this is an opportunity for Turkmenistan to embrace religious freedom, which is one of the litmus tests for a truly civil society. A first positive step would be to change the present law which requires a religious congregation to have at least 500 adult members before it can legally register. Without registration, it becomes an outlaw organization, with members subjected to numerous abuses, such as these recent events described by Keston News Service and Newsroom:

- I have a stone in my office which is a chunk of rock from the Seventh Day Adventist Church which was bull-dozed on November 13th by Turkmen authorities. This church was authorized by the government in 1992.
- On March 3rd, Turkmen authorities arrested Mr. Charyiar Atakov, a Baptist Christian whose brother, Shageldy, is serving a 4-year sentence in a labor camp, reportedly for his religious beliefs. A Baptist colleague, Anatoli Belyayev, was arrested on February 2nd and is still imprisoned in Ashgabad. Last April, the government confiscated their Bibles, declaring that their religious beliefs were "forbidden." Reportedly, during extensive interrogation by the KNB (former KGB), Mr. Atakov was severely beaten after refusing to reveal information about the church.
- The brother mentioned above, Shageldy Atakov was sentenced in August to 4 years in a labor camp on false charges because of his work with a local Baptist church, the members report. Immediately after arrest, the government forced his wife, Artygul Atakov, and 5 children from their home. She is presently under house arrest in another village.
- Also on March 3rd, a respected elderly mullah of the Muslim faith was transferred

from prison into internal exile after appealing to the president for a pardon of reportedly trumped-up charges. It is also reported that the president ordered his Turkmen language Koran to be burned, which is a significant loss since he is a religious scholar and translator.

- In February, reportedly 4 Christians were arrested for their work with churches lacking registration.

- On Feb. 2nd, another Christian, Vitali Tereshin stated that KNB officers burst into his home while he was meeting with church members. The government officers recorded the names of everyone there, and issued a fine for the "unlawful" meeting.

- Missionaries have been deported in the last few months even though their religious activity was peaceful. An additional 2 pastors were incarcerated in December, at the same time that the government raided 4 of the 5 Baptist churches in one region of Turkmenistan.

- Turkmen authorities raided another church in Bezmein, on Feb. 23rd, interrogated the worshipers and warned them to not meet again under threat of criminal prosecution.