

PUBLIC

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Prisoners of conscience/ill-treatment

29 June 2004

TURKMENISTAN

Vepa Tuvakov (m)
Mansur Masharipov (m)

Prisoners of conscience Vepa Tuvakov and Mansur Masharipov were recently jailed for refusing military service on religious grounds. The Turkmen authorities have recently taken measures to avoid being classified as a "country of particular concern" under the United States' International Religious Freedom Act, which could lead to trade sanctions, and Amnesty International believes that international pressure now could secure the men's release. They are at risk of beatings and other ill-treatment in detention.

Both young men are Jehovah's Witnesses, whose faith forbids them to serve in the army. They were arrested in their home town of Dashoguz, near the border with Uzbekistan, in May 2004 and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment. Amnesty International has received credible reports of Turkmen conscientious objectors being beaten while in detention and threatened with repercussions if they did not renounce their faith. In April 2004 two conscientious objectors held in Seydi labour camp, in the east of the country, were reportedly threatened with death. It is not known who issued the death threats but the prison administration was believed to have been aware of the threats. At least one of the two men featured in this Urgent Action is believed to be held in Seydi labour camp.

Six Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience were released in mid-June (for details see Appeal Case Sheet on the case of Kurban Zakirov, AI Index: EUR 61/003/2002; and *Concerns in Europe and Central Asia*, AI Index: EUR 01/001/2004, April 2004). Their release is believed to be part of the Turkmen authorities' recent measures to avoid being classified as a "country of particular concern", which could lead to the USA taking steps ranging from diplomatic protest to targeted trade sanctions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In Turkmenistan there is no civilian alternative for young men who object to compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Those who refuse conscription face imprisonment. Amnesty International regularly receives reports of young men imprisoned solely because they refuse to serve in the army on religious grounds. Some have been sentenced twice for the same "offence": they were imprisoned for refusing military service, and called up again when they were released; when they still refused to serve they were imprisoned a second time. (See, for example, Appeal Case sheet on the case of Nikolay Shelekhov, AI Index: EUR 61/004/2002, November 2002).

The human rights situation in Turkmenistan has been appalling for years. The regime is extremely intolerant of dissent, and it has severely limited civil and political liberties. Freedom of religion has been severely restricted and minority religions face harassment and intimidation. No independent political parties or human rights groups can operate freely in the country, while opponents of the government and civil society activists have been forced into exile or faced imprisonment and persecution. Ethnic minorities have been targets of harassment and discrimination.

As a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Turkmenistan is obliged to "consider introducing ... various forms of alternative service, which are compatible with the reasons for conscientious objection, such forms of alternative service being in principle of a non-combatant or civilian nature, in the public interest and of a non-punitive nature" (Article 18.4 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Russian or Turkmen or your own language:

- expressing concern that Vepa Tuvakov and Mansur Masharipov were imprisoned to punish them for refusing to serve in the army on religious grounds, and calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience;
- stating that Amnesty International believes that everyone has the right to refuse, on conscientious grounds, to carry arms;
- urging the authorities to introduce without delay a civilian alternative to military service, for those whose religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs preclude them from performing military service, in line with Turkmenistan's commitment as a member of the OSCE under Article 18.4 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document.

APPEALS TO: (Please note that it can be difficult getting through to fax numbers in Turkmenistan. If a voice answers, repeat 'fax' until you hear the signal. Fax machines may be switched off outside office hours – five hours ahead of GMT)

President Saparmurad NIYAZOV

744000 g. Ashgabat,
Apparat Prezidenta
Prezidentu Turkmenistana NIYAZOVU S.A.
Turkmenistan

Fax: +993 12 35 51 12 (if you can't fax it, please send your letter by post)

Salutation: Dear President

COPIES TO:

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rashit MEREDOV

744000 g. Ashgabat
pr. Magtymguly, 83
Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Turkmenistana,
Ministru MEREDOVU R.
Turkmenistan

Fax: +993 12 35 42 41 (if you can't fax it, please send your letter by post)

E-mail: mfatm@online.tm

Salutation: Dear Minister

and to diplomatic representatives of Turkmenistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 9 August 2004.