



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TURKMENISTAN: APPEAL CASES

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Appeal for Human Rights on the President's birthday, 19 February



President Niyazov's Personality Cult is rampant throughout the country, including this 12-metre high golden statue of the President standing on top of the 63-metre high Arch of Neutrality in Ashgabat. The statue rotates with the sun.
© Erik Blender

Turkmenistan's appalling human rights record has deteriorated even further following an armed attack on President Niyazov last November, which triggered a new wave of repression throughout the country. For too long Turkmenistan has been largely "forgotten" by the international community. In order to address the desperate human rights situation in this Central Asian country, Amnesty International, along with a coalition of international non-governmental organizations, is conducting a joint international action to take place on 19 February, the 63rd birthday of President Niyazov. Amnesty International is organizing world-wide demonstrations, discussions, and a letter-writing campaign in order to urge the Turkmen authorities to change their current practices and respect their human rights commitments. Join AI's campaign by sending a "birthday card" to President Niyazov expressing your discontent with his country's human rights record (see "recommended action" below).

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN TURKMENISTAN:

Background

An armed attack on President Saparmurad Niyazov's motorcade in the capital city of Ashgabat on 25 November 2002 – that the authorities regarded as a failed assassination and coup attempt – has opened the flood gates for increased repression and violations by the Turkmen authorities. Scores of men, women and children have faced detention, harassment, house eviction, and confiscation of property. Many of them were reportedly targeted solely because of their family relations with the regime's opponents. There have been credible reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention, and dozens have recently been sentenced to long prison terms after grossly unfair trials. In many cases the defendants' lawyers were given little or no notice before the court hearings began. Some lawyers representing the defendants in court reportedly began their plea with the words "I am ashamed to defend a person like you..."

Prior to the November attack on the President, Turkmenistan's human rights conditions were already dismal, including a climate of extreme intolerance of dissent, restriction of political and civil liberties, recurring imprisonment of conscientious objectors, persecution of religious minorities, and tight control of the media and freedom of expression.

¹ Please send appeals until 19 February 2003

Though the new wave of repression is extraordinary, it nevertheless reflects the harsh practices that human rights groups have documented throughout recent years.

Jailed opposition leader

On 29 December, at least four opposition figures accused of masterminding the November attack – Boris Shikhmuradov, Nurmukhammet Khanamov, Khudayberdy Orazov, and Saparmurad Yklymov – were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment by the country's Supreme Court. The latter three were sentenced *in absentia*. The sentences were increased to life imprisonment the following day by the *Khalk Maslakhaty*, Turkmenistan's supreme legislature. Amnesty International believes that the trial fell far short of international standards. Reportedly, none of the defendants in the trial was represented by an independent lawyer.

In Boris Shikhmuradov's televised 'confession' that was believed to have been dictated to him, he stated: "I and my allies ... are not opposition members but ordinary criminals and drug addicts ... there is not a single decent person among us; we are all thugs ... I am not a man able to rule a state ... I am a criminal able only to destroy the state." According to official sources, Boris Shikhmuradov – who had been in exile since he defected in November 2001 – entered the country shortly before the attack on the President and Turkmen secret police detained him on 25 December.

Torture and ill-treatment

Twenty-one-year old student Aili Yklymov and his elder brother Esenaman – relatives of Saparmurad Yklymov – were arrested the day of the attack on the President. According to credible sources, Aili Yklymov was beaten so severely in the basement of the Ministry of National Security in Ashgabat on 5 December that he was unable to walk and had to be taken to questioning on a stretcher. Aili Yklymov was released in mid December, but had to sign an undertaking not to leave Ashgabat. His father told Amnesty International that as a result of the ill-treatment in custody, his son has difficulties concentrating and is almost constantly tired.



Amanmukhammet Yklymov, Orazmamed Yklymov, Yklym Yklymov (left to right)
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Esenaman Yklymov was reportedly also ill-treated in custody the day he was arrested and his ears bled as a result; when he was released the following day he was unable to hold a pen in order to write. At the beginning of January, Esenaman Yklymov was forced to denounce his parents on television and was reportedly sentenced to five years' imprisonment. He remains at risk of torture. Both brothers reportedly received no treatment for their injuries while in custody.

Yklymov, who was reportedly sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment on 19 January, is said to have been tortured in the Ashgabat city police building following his arrest on 25 November. His family claim that as a result of the torture, he lost the sight in his left eye and the hearing in his left ear. His left arm was reportedly broken and he is hardly able to move. Sources allege that a plastic bag was put over his head to restrict his breathing, and that he was suspended by his arms, and forced to wear a gas mask, to which the air supply was cut off. The court reportedly ignored Amanmukhammet Yklymov's allegations that he was tortured in custody. His brother Saparmurad Yklymov told Amnesty International from exile in Sweden on 13 January 2003: "Amanmukhammet was already ill before they arrested him. I'm afraid

he may not survive.”

Their brother Orazmamed Yklymov reportedly confessed that he was involved in the attack on the President following threats by law enforcement officers that his son would be tortured if he did not confess. There were reports that Orazmamed Yklymov appeared in court with a dislocated arm and a swollen eye, and that he was unable to hear in one ear. He was reportedly sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment on 19 January.

Yklym Yklymov, another brother, went into hiding following the 25 November attack. His girlfriend, 27 year-old Olga Prokofyeva, and her mother and sister were reportedly tortured using electric shocks, and beaten with rubber truncheons and plastic bottles filled with water, in an attempt to force them to disclose Yklym Yklymov's whereabouts.

Davlatgeldi Annannyazov, the brother of former political prisoner Gulgeldi Annannyazov, was detained on 30 November in Ashgabat. He was reportedly ill-treated by agents of the Security Service. Gulgeldi Annannyazov told Amnesty International from exile in Norway on 6 December: “When they detained Davlatgeldi the officers beat him and ridiculed him in front of his wife and children. Then they took him to the Interior Ministry and beat him there. I received information that they ill-treated him to force him to denounce me and that they recorded his words on a tape recorder.”



Farid Tukhbatullin
© Amnesty International

Others who were detained and reportedly ill-treated included Batyr Berdyev, a former foreign minister and ambassador to the OSCE who was arrested on 8 December. Three officers of the Ministry of National Security reportedly attached him to a door with handcuffs and then beat him. Batyr Berdyev was sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment on 21 January in connection with the 25 November attack.

Imprisonment of civil society activist

Farid Tukhbatullin, civil society activist and co-chair of the Ecological Club in his home town Dashoguz (Northern Turkmenistan) was arrested on 23 December 2002. He was flown to Ashgabat the same day and taken to the Ministry of National Security, where he continues to be kept. On 26 December Farid Tukhbatullin was reportedly charged with illegally crossing the Turkmen-Uzbek border (Article 214 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan) and concealing a serious criminal act (Article 212). To Amnesty International’s knowledge, no evidence has been found to substantiate either of the charges. Moreover, the latter charge referred to his participation in a conference, held at the beginning of November in Moscow that had been organized by human rights groups. He was accused of refusing to disclose information about plans of exiled opposition groups to carry out an armed coup that, according to the authorities, were discussed at the conference. Amnesty International – whose delegate attended the conference – believes that the charges against Farid Tukhbatullin were brought solely to punish him for exercising his internationally recognized right to freedom of expression and for his peaceful work as a civil society activist. Amnesty International regards Farid Tukhbatullin as a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

Long-standing political prisoner Mukhametkuli Aymuradov

Political prisoner Mukhametkuli Aymuradov was convicted in 1995 of a number of charges, including “attempted terrorism,” and sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment after a reportedly unfair trial. In December 1998, an additional 18 years= imprisonment was added to his sentence in connection with an alleged prison escape attempt. Mukhametkuli Aymuradov is reported to have been denied appropriate medical treatment for a heart attack, a gastric ulcer and recurring inflammation of the kidneys, bladder and gall bladder. Unofficial sources have also said that Mukhametkuli Aymuradov’s eyesight has deteriorated. A regulation, reportedly in force since January, permitted his wife to visit him in the maximum security prison in the Caspian town of Turkmenbashi once every three months for 20 minutes.



Mukhametkuli Aymuradov
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Religious Minorities and Conscientious Objectors

Religious groups other than officially sanctioned Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians have faced harassment and imprisonment in Turkmenistan, as well as external and internal exile. Police officers are said to have physically and verbally abused members of religious minority groups to punish them for their religious affiliation.

Moreover, there is no civilian alternative in Turkmenistan for young men who object to compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Those who refuse conscription face imprisonment under criminal law. Amnesty International continues to receive reports of young men imprisoned in Turkmenistan solely for their refusal to serve in the army on religious grounds.



Kurban Zakirov
© Private

Twenty-year-old Kurban Zakirov, a Jehovah’s Witness, is currently serving a prison sentence of eight years in particularly harsh conditions in a labour colony in Turkmenbashi. He was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment in May 1999 for refusing to serve in the army on religious grounds. Since then, he was allegedly twice denied release for his refusal on conscientious grounds to swear an oath of allegiance to President Saparmurad Niyazov, first when he was pardoned in December 1999 and again upon completion of his sentence around April 2000. Following his second refusal, a new criminal case was brought against him and he was sentenced to an additional eight years’ imprisonment.

There is reason to believe that this case was fabricated to punish him for his religious beliefs.

On 2 July 2002 21-year old Nikolay Shelekhov was sentenced a second time for his objection to serve in the army on religious grounds. The Jehovah’s Witness was convicted of “evasion of military call-up” (Article 219 Part 1 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan) and sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment by the President Niyazov District Court in the capital city of Ashgabat. Appeals lodged against his sentence with Ashgabat City Court and the Supreme Court were turned down in August and October respectively. Nikolay Shelekhov is still suffering from illnesses, including kidney problems, contracted during his previous imprisonment between August 2000 and December 2001.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Please send a birthday card to President Niyazov in English, Russian, Turkmen or your own language congratulating him on his birthday and urging him to celebrate by:

-stopping the clampdown on legitimate dissent, including government critics and their families;

-investigating all allegations of torture and ill-treatment in detention, including the cases of Aili Yklymov, Esenaman Yklymov, Amanmukhammet Yklymov, Orazmamed Yklymov, Davlatgeldi Annannyazov, Batyr Berdyev, Olga Prokofyeva, and her mother and sister;

-conducting a fair retrial that strictly abides by international human rights standards of opposition figure Boris Shikmuradov and all others that were convicted after unfair trials following the 25 November attack;

-releasing detained civil society and environmental activist Farid Tukhbatullin, prisoners of conscience Kurban Zakirov and Nikolay Shelekhov, and long standing possible prisoner of conscience Mukhametkuli Aymuradov.

[You may choose to include as many of the above recommendations as you wish]

SEND BIRTHDAY CARDS TO:

President, Saparmurad NIYAZOV

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

Faxes: + 993 12 – 35 51 12 (if your fax doesn't go through, please send it by post)

Salutation: Dear President,

Optional:

All media and internet access in Turkmenistan are state-controlled. The following radio stations belong to the very few outside sources of information that citizens in Turkmenistan have access to. These radio stations may decide to use the "birthday card" action in one of their programs. As they do not have the capacity to read thousands of cards, if you have a particularly original birthday card, please send a copy to one of the radio stations listed below.

COPIES TO:

Turkmen Serive

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Vinohradska 1

110 00 Prague 1

Czech Republic

Asia Desk

Deutsche Welle

Raderbergguertel 50

D-50968 Cologne

Germany

Thank you for your support!

PLEASE SEND ANY REPLIES FROM THE TURKMEN AUTHORITIES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. (South Caucasus and Central Asia Research and Campaign Team; Amnesty International; 1 Easton Street; London WC1X 0DW; United Kingdom)