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Turkmenistan: Activists threatened Space for freedom of expression shrinks

Two outspoken women activists were threatened and harassed in recent days in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, International Partnership for Human Rights, and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights said today. Turkmenistan's international partners should publicly call on the Turkmenistani government to immediately end the abuses against activists and ensure that they are able to speak out without fear of retaliation.

On November 14, 2017, two unidentified men followed Soltan Achilova, 68, an independent journalist, and insulted and threatened her repeatedly. The following day, police harassed and threatened to arrest Galina Kucherenko, 52, an animal rights activist who often expresses her views critical of the government on the Russian-language social media site *Odnaklassniki.ru*.

"The latest harassment and threats against people who criticize the government highlight Turkmenistan's longstanding efforts to eradicate dissent," said Rachel Denber, deputy Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "The rapid succession of these attacks, one day after the other, suggests a heightened campaign against activists that should end immediately."

Achilova, who works for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen service, Radio Azatlyk, told the station that at least two men in a car followed her on November 14, as she was walking to the US Embassy Information Center in Ashgabat.

Later that day, when Achilova was photographing people lined up to buy vegetable oil in a local store, a man she did not know grabbed her by the arm and yelled threats at her. Achilova told Radio Azatlyk that he said, "I will take a rock and hit you on the head. If you ever use a camera again, I will smash it together with you! Go home and never go out again. Otherwise you will die."

This was the latest incident in a series of threats, including death threats, and other forms

of harassment against Achilova in July that seemed aimed at preventing her from carrying out her work as a journalist.¹ Achilova said she is under constant surveillance from the authorities.

In recent years, Achilova and her fellow colleagues at Radio Azatlyk have been repeatedly harassed and threatened for their work.² Achilova's home internet access has been blocked, as have been both her landline and mobile phones, presumably by the authorities.

Kucherenko told Human Rights Watch that a police official called her on November 15, demanding that she sign a police summons and report to the police station. She said that the official told her that another activist, whom Kucherenko knows well, had filed a complaint against her. At first the official refused to state the nature of the accusation, but eventually said that the activist had complained that she had coerced her to write to "some American magazine," providing no further details.

Human Rights Watch had received information that the activist had been previously harassed by the police, in October, and later told Kucherenko that she had not filed such a complaint.

Fifteen minutes after the phone call, four men who did not identify themselves knocked on Kucherenko's door demanding that she sign a police summons, and alleging that she had no right to refuse. They remained outside her apartment door for about 25 minutes. Kucherenko told them through the intercom that she would not let them in and that they could leave the summons outside her door. They left no papers at her door.

Kucherenko told Human Rights Watch that she fears for her safety and has not left her home since the incident.

In recent months, Turkmenistani authorities have repeatedly tried to intimidate Kucherenko in retaliation for her critical posts on Russian-language social media, she told Human Rights Watch. On the eve of the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, which Turkmenistan hosted in September³, police warned Kucherenko that she could face 25 years in prison without specifying for what.

She has experienced persistent surveillance by agents in civilian clothes, and since

¹ Human Rights Watch, *Turkmenistan: Death Threats Against Journalist: Ahead of Asian Games, Olympic Council of Asia Should Act*, 8 August 2017, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/08/turkmenistan-death-threats-against-journalist>.

² Human Rights Watch, *Turkmenistan: Journalist Harassed, Assaulted: Series of Attacks on Radio Azatlyk Journalists*, 7 November 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/07/turkmenistan-journalist-harassed-assaulted>.

³ Human Rights Watch, *Turkmenistan: Repression Casts Shadow on Asian Games: Olympic Council of Asia Fails Olympic Charter*, 13 September 2017, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/13/turkmenistan-repression-casts-shadow-asian-games>.

September she has had unexplained internet outages and loss of cellular phone service at her home. By early November, she learned that her Internet Protocol address had been blocked, meaning that she cannot access the internet, and the representatives of the Ashgabat City Telephone Network told Kucherenko that her internet access would not be restored.

“Turkmenistani authorities often threaten and harass people as a means to silence the voice of any person who dares to criticize or question government policies,” said Denis Krivosheev, deputy director for research at Amnesty International’s Europe and Central Asia Regional Office. “Since people in Turkmenistan risk different forms of reprisals only for speaking out about human rights abuses, it’s critical for the international community to press the Turkmenistani authorities to ensure these abuses come to an end.”

The harassment of Kucherenko and Achilova follows a pattern of intimidation of human rights defenders and other activists in Turkmenistan, the groups said.⁴

“Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive and closed countries in the world,” said Farid Tukhbatullin of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. The government tolerates no dissent, allows no media or political freedom, and has driven into exile or imprisoned political opposition members, human rights defenders, and independent journalists. The government arrests, threatens, and harasses its critics – often through presumed proxies.

In October, unidentified men in the city of Dashoguz attacked the home⁵ of the 76-year-old mother of Farid Tukhbatullin⁶, and in August, unidentified women verbally assaulted Natalia Shabunts, one of the few openly active human rights defenders inside Turkmenistan, shouting racial slurs and demanding that she go to Russia.⁷

Turkmenistan’s international partners should call on the Turkmenistani authorities to promptly, effectively, and impartially investigate these incidents. They should also call on the government to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, guaranteed under article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Turkmenistan has been a party since 1997.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, International Partnership for Human Rights, and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, *Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Turkmenistan for the 30th session of the UPR Working Group, May 2018*, October 2017, available at <http://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/TM-UPR-submission-full-Oct-2017.pdf>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Turkmenistan: Attack on Activist’s Mother: String of Harassment Episodes Against Government Critics*, 6 November 2017, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/06/turkmenistan-attack-activists-mother>.

⁶ International Partnership for Human Rights, *Turkmenistan: Attack on activist’s mother highlights unrelenting pressure on critical voices*, 3 November 2017, available at <http://iphronline.org/turkmenistan-attack-highlights-unrelenting-pressure-critics.html>.

⁷ Chronicles of Turkmenistan, *Human rights activist Natalya Shabunts verbally assaulted in Ashgabat*, 22 August 2017, available at <https://en.hronikatm.com/2017/08/human-rights-activist-natalya-shabunts-verbally-assaulted-in-ashgabat/>.

“This harassment further bolsters Turkmenistan’s image as one of the most repressive countries in the world,” said Brigitte Dufour, director of the International Partnership for Human Rights. “The latest reports of intimidation against Kucherenko and Achilova only further prove the extent to which free speech is virtually nonexistent in Turkmenistan.”

For more Human Rights Watch reporting on Turkmenistan, please visit:

<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/turkmenistan>

For more Amnesty International reporting on Turkmenistan, please visit:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/>

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