

PUBLIC

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14 March 2006

UA 58/06 **Fear of torture or ill-treatment/ incommunicado detention/ prisoners of conscience**

TURKMENISTAN **Dzhumadurdy OVEZOV (m), 54, journalist**
Meretmuhammet KHOMMADOV (m), 54, journalist

Dzhumadurdy Ovezov and Meretmuhammet Khommadov, journalists from the Mary region of southeastern Turkmenistan, have been held incommunicado since their arrest on 7 March, and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Amnesty International believes that they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

The two men work for the US-funded *Radio Liberty*, a radio network which frequently criticizes the Turkmen authorities in its broadcasts. It is not known where the men are being held, and neither their families nor their *Radio Liberty* colleagues have been able to obtain any information regarding the reasons for their arrest. The Prague office of *Radio Liberty* reported on 10 March that the Turkmen authorities have disconnected the telephones of the families and friends of Dzhumadurdy Ovezov and Meretmuhammet Khommadov, and also of its other staff in the country.

Radio Liberty journalists have been deliberately targeted by the authorities in the past for their reporting. For example, the mobile phone of Dzhumadurdy Ovezov was cut off on 5 November 2004, one day after *Radio Liberty*'s Turkmen Service began broadcasting a series of interviews which he had conducted on his mobile phone, in which he criticized government policies on land reform and spoke out about human rights violations in Turkmenistan.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Turkmen authorities' clampdown on media freedom has intensified since an alleged attempt on the life of Turkmenistan's President, Saparmurat Niyazov, in 2002. All domestic media is state-controlled and the authorities have taken a series of measures aimed at preventing access to alternative sources of information. The authorities routinely block websites that publicize "unauthorized" information and Amnesty International has previously received reports of officials visiting the homes of individuals whom they had identified as utilizing such sites.

In a move to further purge Turkmenistan of critical reporting and to prevent critical information from coming to the attention of the international community, the Turkmen authorities have increasingly targeted people affiliated with the US-funded *Radio Liberty*, which broadcasts across Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and southwestern Asia. The Turkmen Service of *Radio Liberty* is one of the few remaining sources of alternative information available to people inside Turkmenistan.

Amnesty International has documented how the authorities have in the past used arbitrary detention, threats including death threats, beatings, and the targeting of family members to silence those affiliated or cooperating with *Radio Liberty*. In July 2004 Saparmurat Ovezberdiev, *Radio Liberty*'s correspondent in the capital, Ashgabat, was forced into exile as a result of severe government pressure that included arbitrary arrest, beatings, and the threat of long imprisonment or death. The telephone lines of people critical of the Turkmen authorities, who have given interviews to *Radio Liberty*, have in many cases been disconnected in an apparent attempt to prevent them from passing on information about government policies and human rights violations.

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

- expressing concern at the arrest of Dzhumadurdy Ovezov and Meretmuhammet Khommakov, *Radio Liberty* journalists in the Mary region in southeastern Turkmenistan;
- noting that Amnesty International believes them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression, and calling for their immediate and unconditional release;
- expressing concern that they are held incommunicado and may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment;
- urging the authorities to ensure that they are treated in accordance with international human rights law, in particular, that they are not tortured or ill-treated;
- calling on the authorities to reveal their whereabouts immediately, and to grant them immediate access to their relatives, lawyers and any necessary medical treatment.

APPEALS TO:

President of Turkmenistan,

Saparmurat Atayevich NIYAZOV

Turkmenistan; 744000 g. Ashgabat;

Apparat Prezidenta; Prezidentu Turkmenistana

NIYAZOVU S.A.; TURKMENISTAN

Fax: + 993 12 35 51 12

Salutation: Dear President

COPIES TO:

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan,

Rashit Ovezgeldiyevich MEREDOV

Turkmenistan; 744000 g. Ashgabat; pr. Magtymguly, 83; Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Turkmenistana;

Ministru MEREDOVU R.; TURKMENISTAN

Fax: + 993 12 35 42 41

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 25 April 2006.