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PUBLIC STATEMENT

TURKMENISTAN

Political prisoners released while opposition leader still under house arrest

Amnesty International welcomed the news of the release of former prisoner of conscience Durdymurad Khodzha-Mukhammed who had been confined against his will in a psychiatric hospital for political reasons since February 1996. The organization is however dismayed that opposition leader, Abdy Kulyev, remains under house arrest simply for his opposition to the government.

Durdymurad Khodzha-Mukhammed's release was announced yesterday in the USA during President Niyazov's first official state visit. Begmyrat Khojaev and Batyr Sakhetliyev, two of a group of political prisoners known as the "Ashgabat Eight", were also said to have been released from detention.

The "Ashgabat Eight" have been serving long prison sentences after being convicted of criminal offences, some involving violence, arising from their participation in an unprecedented organized anti-government protest in Ashgabat on 12 June 1995. In January 1998 one of the men died in prison reportedly as a consequence of sustained beatings.

Amnesty International is however concerned at reports from Turkmenistan that former Minister of Foreign Affairs and leader of the Turkmen opposition Abdy Kulyev may have been charged with serious anti-state crimes simply to punish him for his peaceful opposition to President Niyazov's regime.

Abdy Kulyev was arrested at Ashgabat airport on 17 April after returning to Turkmenistan after five years in exile on the eve of President Niyazov's visit to the USA. Abdy Kulyev is currently under house arrest in Ashgabat. He was reportedly charged with trying to overthrow the Government of Turkmenistan, organizing an anti-government demonstration and extortion.

Amnesty International is worried that the charges against Abdy Kulyev have been linked to possible prisoners of conscience Mukhametkuli Aymuradov and Khoshali Garayev and that of the "Ashgabat Eight". Mukhametkuli Aymuradov and Khoshali Garayev were convicted in 1995 of anti-state crimes including "attempted terrorism" and are serving 15 and 12 years respectively in a maximum security prison. There is strong evidence to suggest that they are innocent of these crimes, and that the case against them was fabricated to punish them solely for their association with exiled opponents of the Government of Turkmenistan, in particular, Abdy Kulyev.

Supporters of Abdy Kulyev claim that he is accused by the authorities of having orchestrated the plot to overthrow the Niyazov regime, to which the two men were allegedly party.

Background

The charge of extortion is said to relate to an allegedly fabricated criminal case which Turkmen authorities had originally tried to bring against Abdy Kulyev in 1994 when he was living in Moscow.

Abdy Kulyev maintained that the allegations had been concocted by the Turkmen authorities to discredit him.

Abdy Kulyev held various diplomatic posts in the USSR before becoming Turkmenistan's first foreign minister after independence. He resigned his post in 1992 and left Turkmenistan for Russia, where he became a leading figure in the exiled opposition to President Niyazov.

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