

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## TURKMENISTAN: APPEAL CASES

7 June 2002<sup>1</sup>; AI Index: EUR 61/003/2002; public

### Prisoner of conscience Kurban Zakirov

Twenty-year-old Kurban Zakirov is currently serving a prison sentence of eight years in particularly harsh conditions in a labour colony in the Caspian town of Turkmenbashi. He was sentenced to one year's imprisonment in May 1999 for refusing to serve in the army on religious grounds. 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 reportedly 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.

Photo: Kurban Zakirov;

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Kurban Zakirov was brought up in a children's home in the town of Chardzhev. At the age of 17 he became a Jehovah's Witness. In January 1999 he reportedly attracted the attention of the police when, during a visit to a private home in Chardzhev, he was caught discussing the Bible. As a result, he was reportedly held for 30 days for participating in an illegal religious meeting. Following his release he was allegedly called-up for military service and summoned to the Military Commissariat in Chardzhev. Kurban Zakirov reportedly petitioned the President of Turkmenistan to excuse him from compulsory military service on the grounds that his conscientiously held beliefs did not allow him to serve in the army. However, he was charged with "evasion of regular call-up" under Article 219 of the Turkmen Criminal Code and placed in pre-trial detention on 23 April 1999. On 25 May 1999 he was reportedly sentenced to one year's imprisonment for his refusal to serve in the army on religious grounds.

In December 1999 Kurban Zakirov was reportedly granted a pardon, but was not released because he refused on religious grounds to swear an oath of loyalty to the President by placing his hand on the Koran. Upon completion of his one-year sentence, Kurban Zakirov reportedly again refused to swear the oath. There are reports that prison officials subsequently fabricated a case against Kurban Zakirov to punish him for his religious beliefs and to ensure that he would not be released. According to Jehovah's Witnesses inside Turkmenistan, a prison official ripped off a shoulder strap from his uniform in the presence of other officials and accused Kurban Zakirov of having attacked him. Subsequently, Kurban Zakirov was sentenced to an additional eight years' imprisonment. The exact charge or charges for which he was convicted are not known to Amnesty International. He is serving his sentence in a strict regime labour colony in the city of Turkmenbashi, in particularly harsh conditions. Twenty two men are reportedly kept in a cell designed for ten. They reportedly sleep on a board that is between 20 to 30 centimetres wide and not quite as long as the average person's height. Reportedly, the prison administration is constantly pressurizing Kurban Zakirov and other prisoners of minority religions to renounce their faith.

Amnesty International believes that everyone has the right to refuse to carry arms on conscientious grounds and considers anyone imprisoned for exercising this right a prisoner of conscience. Following Kurban Zakirov's conviction to one year's imprisonment in May 1999, Amnesty International was calling for his prompt and immediate release on the above grounds. The organization is concerned at

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<sup>1</sup> Please use this Appeal Case sheet as the basis for your letter-writing and outreach until further notice.

reports that Kurban Zakirov was twice denied release following his refusal on conscientious grounds to swear an oath of allegiance to the President. Amnesty International is also concerned at allegations that a criminal case was fabricated while Kurban Zakirov was serving his prison sentence to punish him for his religious beliefs and to ensure that he would not be released. The organization continues to consider Kurban Zakirov a prisoner of conscience and calls for his prompt and unconditional release until and unless the government can prove that he was convicted according to international fair trial standards for the additional charge or charges brought against him while he was in prison.

**Background information:**

The Central Asian state of Turkmenistan became independent following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then it has been dominated by President Saparmurad Niyazov, who has exercised a monopoly on power as both head of state and head of government. The government is extremely intolerant of dissent, restricting political and civil liberties and retaining tight control of the media.

There is no civilian alternative 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.

Religious groups other than Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians face harassment and imprisonment, 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. (For more information on religious minority groups in Turkmenistan, please refer to Amnesty International’s report *Turkmenistan: Harassment and imprisonment of religious believers*, AI Index: EUR 61/07/00, March 2000).

**Recommended actions:**

Please send politely worded letters in English, Russian, Turkmen or your own language (*if you write in Russian it would be good to apologise for not writing in Turkmen and explain that this is because you do not know the language*);

**Whom to write** (Please note that it may be difficult to send faxes. If a voice answers during office hours, repeat 'fax' until connected; fax machines may be switched off outside office hours - five hours ahead of GMT; if the fax does not work, please send your letter by post)

<p><b>President of Turkmenistan</b></p> <p>Saparmurad NIYAZOV</p> <p>Respublika Turkmenistan; 744000 g. Ashgabat;</p>	<p><b>Procurator of the town of Turkmenbashi</b></p> <p>name not known</p> <p>Respublika Turkmenistan; g. Turkmenbashi; Gorodskaya</p>	<p><b>Director of the labour colony where Kurban Zakirov is kept</b></p> <p>T.B. MERETKLYCHEV</p> <p>Respublika Turkmenistan; g. Turkmenbashi; BPT-5 p/p V.S.; Direktoru Meretklychevu</p>
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Apparat Prezidenta; Prezidentu Turkmenistana NIYAZOVU S.A.; TURKMENISTAN  Faxes: + 993 12 - 35 51 12  Salutation: Dear President,	prokuratura; Prokuroru; TURKMENISTAN  <i>Indicate in your letter that you are sending a copy of the letter to the Procurator General (find address below)</i>  Salutation: Dear Procurator,	T.B.; TURKMENISTAN  <i>Indicate in your letter that you are sending a copy of the letter to the Head of the State Directorate of the Criminal Executive System at the Interior Ministry (find address below)</i>  Salutation: Dear Director,
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Send copies of your letters to:

- Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashit MEREDOV

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

Faxes: +993 12 - 51 14 30 / 35 49 18

- *Send a copy of your letter to the Procurator of the town of Turkmenbashi to the Procurator General of Turkmenistan*, Gurbanbibi ATAJANOVA

Turkmenistan; g. Ashgabat; ul. Seidi, 4; Prokuratura Turkmenistana; Generalnomu prokuroru; ATAJANOVOY G.; TURKMENISTAN

Faxes: + 993 12 - 35 44 82

- *Send a copy of your letter to the prison director to the Head of the State Directorate of the Criminal Executive System* (prison service), name unknown

Turkmenistan; g. Ashgabat; ul. Zhitnikova; Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del Turkmenistana  
GUUIS; Nachalniku; TURKMENISTAN

Faxes: + 993 12 - 44 85 66

- to the Ambassador of Turkmenistan to your country (if there is an embassy).

You can also send a letter to Kurban Zakirov to give him moral support. **Important:** You may mention Amnesty International in your letters to him. Please be aware that correspondence from abroad will be subjected to very strict control from the authorities, so be careful not to raise any political questions.

Respublika Turkmenistan; g.Turkmenbashi; BPT-5 p/p V.S.; Zaklyuchennomu Zakirovu Kurbanu; TURKMENISTAN

**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)**