

# **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH INTERNATIONAL HELSINKI FEDERATION INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS MEMORIAL HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE PRESS RELEASE**

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## **Turkmenistan: Turkmen leader should mark birthday by introducing rule of law**

President Saparmurat Niazov of Turkmenistan should mark his birthday by committing himself to protect human rights, a coalition of human rights groups said today. President Niazov's birthday, February 19, is a major event in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan has long had an appalling human rights record. An armed attack on President Niazov last November triggered a new wave of repression throughout the country.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the International League for Human Rights, and Memorial Human Rights Center today called on President Niazov to release those arbitrarily or unlawfully detained, permit visits to those imprisoned, grant human rights monitors access to Turkmenistan, and ensure fair and public retrials for those convicted at unfair trials in relation to the November attack.

A series of actions is planned for President Niazov's birthday. Amnesty International is coordinating a birthday card web action and demonstrations at Turkmen embassies.

For the past decade President Niazov has presided over a disastrous human rights situation. The government tolerates no dissent, tightly controls the media and curtails freedom of expression. The only sanctioned religions are Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy; other religious faiths are persecuted. Ethnic minorities are discriminated against. Freedom of movement is severely restricted. The government does not allow non-governmental human rights organizations to operate. It has banned the circus, opera, and philharmonic orchestra, and closed the Academy of Sciences. Though the new wave of repression is extraordinary, it nevertheless reflects the harsh practices that human rights groups have documented throughout recent years.

On November 25, 2002 gunmen assaulted the president's armoured motorcade, injuring one

person. President Niazov was unharmed. According to official reports, 67 people have been arrested on charges of involvement in the assassination attempt, although many believe the figures to be higher. Fifty-nine people have been convicted in closed trials by the Supreme Court and Ashgabat City Court, which lack judicial independence. Eight were given sentences of life imprisonment -- three were sentenced in absentia -- and 51 were given sentences ranging from five to twenty-five years of imprisonment. The defendants did not have attorneys of their own choosing, and some of the government-appointed attorneys reportedly expressed, in public, disgust at the prospect of defending their clients. Many of the detainees were reportedly tortured and ill-treated to force them to confess or to incriminate others.

Many of those detained are family members of those associated with Turkmenistan's opposition-in-exile. Family members have been denied access to their arrested relatives, and many have no information about their well-being or whereabouts. Other relatives have been threatened with arrest and subjected to eviction from their homes, relentless harassment and surveillance. There is little doubt that the intent is to pressure exiles to return, and to compel those in custody to confess or give testimony.

Throughout the past decade the rule of law has been so thoroughly degraded in Turkmenistan that an effective investigation -- ensuring due process rights -- and fair trial of the perpetrators of the November 25 assassination attempt is highly unlikely. In the past the Turkmen authorities have tortured dissidents and sentenced them to long prison terms. Among them is Mukhametkuli Aimuradov, 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.

Among those arrested in the post November 25 crackdown is an environmental activist, Farid Tukhbatullin, who is believed to be a prisoner of conscience and held because of his non-violent environmental advocacy.

The coalition of human rights organizations urges President Niazov to:

Immediately and unconditionally release Farid Tukhbatullin and Mukhametkuli Aimuradov;

Investigate all allegations of torture and ill-treatment and take appropriate action against all those responsible;

Cease persecuting all persons -- who exercise their right to freedom of expression, including non-violent political dissent -- and their family members;

With regard to those detained for the November 25 attack,

End incommunicado detention; allow family members to visit them in prison and deliver essential food and medicines;

Ensure fair and public retrials that meet international due process standards of anyone convicted at unfair trials;

Allow human rights monitors to operate in Turkmenistan.

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