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## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT**

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### **Turkmenistan: Activist at Serious Risk of Harm**

**(London, New York, October 13, 2010) – The following statement was issued today by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch about a credible report of a potentially life-threatening plot against Farid Tukhbatullin, who leads a Vienna-based nongovernmental organization from exile to press for human rights in Turkmenistan:**

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are concerned about allegations that Farid Tukhbatullin, director of the Vienna-based nongovernmental organization Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), is at risk of harm by agents of the Ministry of National Security (MNS) of Turkmenistan.

According to a reliable source who requested anonymity, officials at the Ministry discussed “get[ting] rid of [Farid Tukhbatullin] quietly”, in a way that is hard to trace, “something like an accident or something that [could] cause heart failure.” Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch believe that this information should be taken very seriously.

Farid Tukhbatullin has worked on environmental and human rights issues in Turkmenistan since 1993. In December 2002 he was arrested and then imprisoned to punish him for his peaceful activities as a civil society activist and human rights defender, and Amnesty International adopted him as a prisoner of conscience. As a result of international pressure, he was released in April 2003. To be able to continue his human rights work and to avoid further persecution in Turkmenistan, he left the country in June 2003 and received refugee status in Austria that November.

The TIHR was established and registered in Vienna in November 2004. It has published information on issues such as prison conditions, treatment of ethnic minorities, freedom of association, child labour and the education system and has submitted reports about human rights to intergovernmental organizations, international media and international human rights organizations. In so doing Farid Tukhbatullin and his colleagues have shed rare rays of light on human rights violations taking place in Turkmenistan.

The group’s reports are based on information from sources inside Turkmenistan whose identity has to be withheld to protect them and their families. In recent years the Turkmenistani authorities have on many occasions tried to silence the group, including attempting to identify Farid Tukhbatullin’s correspondents and harassing and intimidating his relatives in Turkmenistan.

Some of his colleagues have been forced to leave Turkmenistan for fear of reprisals for their human rights work. Others have ended their cooperation with him following threats by MNS

officials. In April 2008, a Turkmenistani diplomat “recommended” that Farid Tukhbatullin either “stop his activities altogether” or “tone down” criticism of the authorities on his group’s website. Earlier this year MNS officers interviewed friends, former teachers and classmates of his sons, apparently to identify TIHR correspondents and to put pressure on him and his sons, who live with him in exile.

Farid Tukhbatullin believes that his interview in Russian about the group’s assessment of the human rights situation in Turkmenistan, which was broadcast on the satellite TV channel K+ on 28 and 29 September, may have angered the authorities and prompted the threat. The TV channel broadcasts to Central Asia and the interview provided people in Turkmenistan with a rare opportunity to get information about the human rights situation in their country from a non-governmental source.

On 30 September President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov gave a speech to security ministry officials on the ministry’s 19th anniversary and called on them to fight those who “defame our democratic law-based secular state and try to destroy the unity and solidarity of our society”, the official government website reported. Subsequently, for about a week, the TIHR website was disabled from an attack by unknown hackers, and most of the content could not be displayed. The group has since moved the website from a Moscow host to another one abroad, and access to the site has been restored.

On 9 October a civil society activist first warned Farid Tukhbatullin of an alleged plan to “hunt him down”, that he had heard about “from confidential sources”. Concerns were heightened when another source provided further details of the plan on 11 October and explained, confidentially, how the information had been obtained.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch call on the Turkmenistani authorities to investigate allegations that MNS agents are planning to harm human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin and to guarantee that no actions will be taken against Tukhbatullin or the TIHR. We urge the Austrian authorities to take the threats to Farid Tukhbatullin seriously and to take all appropriate measures to ensure his safety.

Both organizations call on the international community to raise Farid Tukhbatullin’s case with the Turkmenistani authorities and to obtain assurances that the activist and his group will be able to carry out their human rights work freely, in line with Turkmenistan’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Turkmenistan is a party to, in particular Articles 19 and 22, which guarantee freedom of expression and association respectively.

### **Background information**

Human rights defenders and other independent civil society activists are unable to operate openly in Turkmenistan. Opposition parties do not exist. Many civil society and opposition activists live in exile. Virtually all media are state-controlled. For many years the authorities have closely monitored communication channels such as telephone lines and the internet. In recent years Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have received credible reports of harassment, arbitrary detention and imprisonment after unfair trials in cases involving human rights defenders and other civil society activists, independent journalists, other individuals critical of the authorities..

Turkmenistan poses a strong challenge to human rights research. Only a fraction of cases involving human rights violations come to the attention of human rights observers. The authorities have denied non-governmental human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, entry to the country. Independent civil society activists in Turkmenistan are often prevented from meeting with international delegations from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and individual governments visiting the country.

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