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Turkmenistan: Human Rights -- the missing chapter in President Niyazov's "holy" book

The human rights situation in Turkmenistan has been appalling for years. It has deteriorated even further following the November 2002 alleged assassination attempt on President Saparmurat Niyazov, Amnesty International said today as it launched a series of actions addressing the appalling abuses in Turkmenistan.

"Sadly, although the new wave of repression is extraordinary, it nevertheless reflects the harsh practices that human rights groups have documented throughout recent years."

A climate of extreme intolerance of dissent, restriction of political and civil liberties, recurring imprisonment of conscientious objectors, persecution of religious minorities, and tight control of the media and curtailment of freedom of expression was prevalent in the country even before the November events.

Since then, scores of men, women and children have faced detention, harassment, house eviction, and confiscation of property. Many of them were reportedly targeted solely because of their family relations with the regime's opponents. There have been credible reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention, and dozens have been sentenced to long prison terms, including life imprisonment after grossly unfair trials in which they were convicted of involvement in the alleged attack.

"For too long Turkmenistan has been largely forgotten by the international community -- and through its restrictive visa requirements and strict control inside the country the authorities do their best to ensure that no critical media is present in the country," Amnesty International said.

"Away from international public scrutiny President Niyazov freely pursues his personality cult. Today is *Rukhnama* day in Turkmenistan, a public holiday celebrating the President's "holy" book *Rukhnama* (Book of the Soul) -- which he compares to the Bible and the Koran; he claims that the book 'was born in (his) heart through the will of the Almighty' and that Turkmen people should live their lives according to this book."

Everyone has to know parts of the *Rukhnama* by heart. Pupils, students, teachers and prisoners have to recite paragraphs of the book on many occasions. In order to pass the entry exams for universities, students have to answer questions about the *Rukhnama*. Prisoners have been denied release because they refused to swear the oath of allegiance to the President on the *Rukhnama*.

The domination by President Niyazov of all aspects of life and the personality cult he has surrounded himself with, are key to the failure to address impunity or counter widespread abuse of human rights.

Silencing political dissent

The authorities of Turkmenistan have conducted several waves of repression against political opponents since the country became independent in 1991. Many have been forced into exile; many have faced detention, imprisonment following unfair trials, house arrests, and torture and ill-treatment. Several of those that were later released had to publicly repent on television, promising not to engage in political activities and in many cases had to swear an oath of loyalty to the President. Several waves of politically motivated purges lead to the demotion, dismissal or imprisonment of numerous senior officials in recent years. The November 2002 events triggered another large-scale clampdown on political dissent.

According to the authorities, on 25 November 2002 opposition supporters attacked the President's motorcade in Ashgabat in an attempt to assassinate him and to overthrow the constitutional order. The President remained unharmed. The investigation into the alleged attack and the subsequent trials have been marred by serious human rights violations, including credible reports of torture and ill-treatment. As a result, the full truth about the 25 November events has not yet come to light.

At least 59 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 their absence -- and 51 were given sentences ranging from five to 25 years' imprisonment. The defendants were not represented by independent lawyers and some lawyers reportedly began their plea with the words *"I am ashamed to defend a person like you..."* International trial observers were not given access to any of the court hearings. Many of the defendants were reportedly tortured and ill-treated to force them to 'confess' or to incriminate others.

Many relatives of those convicted in connection with the November 2002 events do not know where the prisoners are kept. Relatives of the prisoners and representatives of independent bodies have to date been denied permission to visit them. The lack of transparency heightens Amnesty International's concern that the prisoners continue to be at risk of torture and ill-treatment. There have been unconfirmed reports that some of the prisoners died in custody as a result of torture. Many relatives of those convicted and imprisoned reported that they have been refused permission to pass on food parcels and medicine to their relatives.

Clampdown on religious dissent

The authorities of Turkmenistan are also extremely intolerant of religious dissent. Under the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, religious congregations are required to register with the government, and since re-registration of religious organizations was made compulsory in early 1997 only two groups -- the Russian Orthodox Church and Sunni Muslims -- have obtained registration.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Sunni Muslim community are under strict state control and members of registered religious groups have been targeted and punished when daring to express any kind of dissent.

Those belonging to religious groups that are not officially sanctioned, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, Baha'i, Buddhists, Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews, have been denied any public religious activities and have faced imprisonment, deportation, internal exile, house eviction and harassment for years. Many have been harassed by the authorities also for religious activities carried out in private, for example, when holding services in private homes. Amnesty International has documented many cases in which members of religious minorities were tortured or ill-treated by law enforcement officers. Many foreign missionaries have been deported from Turkmenistan in recent years and several ethnic Turkmen followers who advocated a religious belief other than those officially sanctioned

have been forced into exile or have been forcibly resettled inside the country.

Civil society

The authorities of Turkmenistan have severely controlled the activities of civil society activists and have dramatically narrowed the space in which civil society groups can operate. The civil society community is relatively small, not least because its activists have had to take great personal risks in order to carry out their activities. Civil society activists have been frequent targets of imprisonment, detention, persecution and harassment, including routine summoning to the Security Service.

The authorities have in many instances prevented civil society activists, journalists, opposition supporters and others from meeting representatives of foreign governments and international organizations, including the UN and the OSCE on their visits to Turkmenistan.

Punishing the relatives

The authorities of Turkmenistan have frequently targeted persons because of the known or perceived political or religious activities of their relatives. They have faced torture and ill-treatment, detention, harassment, eviction from their homes, demolition of their houses, and dismissals from their jobs. Many of those living in exile refrain from openly criticizing the authorities of Turkmenistan so as not to put their relatives who remain in the country at risk.

Recommendations

Amnesty International urges the authorities of Turkmenistan to promptly introduce fundamental reforms of domestic law and institutions in line with the country's obligations under international human rights law and to significantly improve its human rights record.

The organization urges the international community to build on their efforts to address human rights violations in Turkmenistan and to commit themselves to long-term engagement with a view to improving the human rights situation in Turkmenistan.

For a full copy of Amnesty International's briefing: *Turkmenistan: Clampdown on dissent* please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur610152003>

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