

Turkmenistan: Opposition leader escapes extradition

A leading figure in Turkmenistan's political opposition has won the right to stay in Bulgaria. Varna's district court ruled that Annadurdy Khadzhev should not be extradited to Turkmenistan, where he faced the risk of torture and imprisonment.

Khadzhev is a leader of Turkmenistan's exiled Watan (Fatherland) Party. He was detained by the Bulgarian authorities in February after Turkmenistani authorities lodged an extradition request, accusing him of embezzling about US\$41m from the Central Bank of Turkmenistan. Forcible return to the country would have put him at serious risk of persecution and an unfair trial.

Khadzhev's wife Tadzhiqul Begmedova, director of the human rights group Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (THF), thanked Amnesty International (AI) for its efforts.

"I believe that international pressure was crucial to ensure the decision was taken that my husband will not be extradited," she said.

Annadurdy Khadzhev was granted "humanitarian status" in Bulgaria in March 2004. This allowed him to stay in the country on the grounds that he would face serious human rights violations if returned to Turkmenistan.

Many of his relatives and associates have been subjected to human rights violations. His sister Ogulsapar Muradova, a THF member and correspondent for the US-funded Radio Liberty, died in custody in September 2006 in disputed circumstances. AI had adopted her as a prisoner of conscience after she was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on fabricated charges following an unfair trial in August 2006.