

PUBLIC

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Fear of torture

07 January 2003

TURKMENISTAN Farid Tukhbatullin (m), civil society activist and co-chair of the Ecological Club

Civil society activist and ecologist Farid Tukhbatullin was arrested on 23 December 2002 in the city of Dashoguz, in Northern Turkmenistan. He was flown to the capital Ashgabat and is currently being held at the Ministry of National Security, where he is believed to be at risk of torture.

In a statement issued shortly after his arrest, fellow civil society activists in Turkmenistan expressed serious concern about his wellbeing: “[We believe that] his life is in real danger...His detention...is a result of the continuing mass repressions in Turkmenistan that remind us...of the terrible times under Stalin.” They added: “In order to protect his life every public statement and every letter of support is important.”

Reportedly, Farid Tukhbatullin was charged on 26 December with illegally crossing the Turkmen-Uzbek border (Article 214 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan) and concealing a serious criminal act (Article 212). No evidence is known that would substantiate either of the charges. The latter charge allegedly referred to his participation in a conference, held at the beginning of November in Moscow that had been organized by human rights groups. He has reportedly been accused of refusing to disclose information about the plans of exiled opposition groups who, along with human rights organizations, attended the conference. Amnesty International believes that the charges against Farid Tukhbatullin were brought to punish him for exercising his internationally recognized right to freedom of expression and for his peaceful activities as a civil society activist.

In the past, Farid Tukhbatullin has frequently been harassed by the authorities. For example, on 9 December 2002, he was summoned to the regional branch of the Ministry of National Security and questioned about his participation at the conference in Moscow. A senior official told him: “We cannot forbid you to take part in conferences like that, but I hope you know what that can lead to.”

Farid Tukhbatullin’s arrest is reportedly the first arrest of a civil society activist in an ongoing wave of repression triggered by an attack on the President’s motorcade on 25 November 2002. His arrest sends out a worrying signal to the small community of civil society activists in Turkmenistan, who to date have carried out their activities under considerable pressure of harassment and intimidation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the Central Asian state of Turkmenistan gained independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, President Saparmurad Niyazov has exercised a monopoly on power as both head of state and head of government. Although Turkmenistan ratified several important United Nations treaties related to human rights, no dissent can be voiced without repercussions; all media outlets are strictly state-controlled, no human rights groups can openly function within the country, and reports about the torture and ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners continue.

The 25 November 2002 attack on Saparmurad Niyazov’s motorcade that left the President unharmed led to a new wave of repression in Turkmenistan. On 29 December, at least four opposition leaders and prime suspects for the attack were sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment by the country’s Supreme Court at a trial that fell far short of international standards; three of them were sentenced in absentia. Scores of family members of several known government critics who were implicated by the authorities in the attack have faced detention, harassment and house eviction. Amnesty International is concerned about reports that many of them were targeted solely because of their family relations with government opponents. Despite difficulties in obtaining information from this almost closed country, the arrests have been accompanied by credible reports of ill-treatment of many of the detainees (for more information see UA 353/02, AI Index: EUR

61/006/2002, 6 December 2002). Amnesty International is concerned that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by the authorities to intimidate and extract 'confessions'.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Russian, Turkmen or your own language:

- expressing concern at the arrest of Farid Tukhbatullin, the co-chairman of the Ecological Club in Dashoguz;
- calling for his immediate and unconditional release;
- urging the authorities to ensure that Farid Tukhbatullin is treated in accordance with international human rights law, in particular, that he is not tortured or ill-treated;
- stating that you believe that Farid Tukhbatullin was arrested to punish him for exercising his internationally recognized right to freedom of expression and for peacefully carrying out his work as a civil society activist.

APPEALS TO (*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 four hours ahead of GMT; if your fax does not go through, please send it by airmail*):

President of Turkmenistan.

Saparmurad Atayevich NIYAZOV
Turkmenistan; 744000 g. Ashgabat;
Apparat Prezidenta; Prezidentu Turkmenistana
NIYAZOVU S.A.; TURKMENISTAN
Telegrams: Turkmenistan, 744000 Ashgabat, Prezidentu
Faxes: + 993 12 35 51 12 / 51 17 55
Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan.

Rashit Ovezgeldiyevich MEREDOV
Turkmenistan; 744000 g. Ashgabat; pr. Magtymguly, 83; Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Turkmenistana;
Ministru MEREDOVU R.; TURKMENISTAN
Telegrams: Turkmenistan, 744000 Ashgabat, Ministru inostrannykh del
Faxes: + 993 12 35 42 41
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Procurator General of Turkmenistan, Gurbanbibi ATAJANOVA
Turkmenistan; g. Ashgabat; ul. Seidi, 4; Prokuratura Turkmenistana; Generalnomu prokuroru;
ATAJANOVOY G.
Telegrams: Turkmenistan, Ashgabat, Generalnomu prokuroru
Faxes: + 993 12 35 44 82
and to diplomatic representatives of Turkmenistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 18 February 2003.