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Possible prisoner of conscience/ Fear for safety

13 February 2004

TURKMENISTAN

Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev (m), aged 65

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev, a critic of the Turkmen government, following his reported forcible confinement in a psychiatric hospital. It is feared he may have been confined solely for the non-violent expression of his political views. If this is the case, Amnesty International would consider him a prisoner of conscience.

On 10 February, according to Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev's family, several people "in white coats" came without warning to his house in the village of Suvchy, in the Balkan region of western Turkmenistan. They reportedly took him to a psychiatric hospital in the town of Nebitdag in the Balkan region, where he may be being inappropriately administered psychotropic drugs. All access to him has so far been denied, according to the latest information received by Amnesty International.

On 3 January Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev sent a letter to President Saparmurat Niyazov and the governor of Balkan region, urging them to authorise a two-day-long demonstration on the main square of the town of Nebitdag on 18 and 19 February, to coincide with the President's birthday. Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev wrote: "We want to carry out a peaceful demonstration... to express our disagreement with the policies of the President and other senior government officials and urge them to rectify any shortcomings in due course... I ask you to refrain from using force against the participants of the meeting." Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev had repeatedly criticized President Niyazov's policies in interviews he gave to Radio Liberty and had openly spoken about the necessity to form an opposition political party.

Amnesty International knows of several cases in the mid-1990s where confinement in psychiatric hospitals was used by the Turkmen authorities to clamp down on dissent. Amnesty International is concerned that Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev's case may indicate that the authorities are returning to this practice.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The human rights situation in Turkmenistan has been appalling for years. It has deteriorated even further following an alleged assassination attempt on President Niyazov on 25 November 2002, which triggered a new wave of repression across Turkmenistan.

The regime is extremely intolerant of dissent, and it has severely limited civil and political liberties. No independent political parties or human rights groups can operate openly in the country, while opponents of the government and civil society activists have been forced into exile or faced imprisonment and persecution. Freedom of religion and of movement have been severely restricted and ethnic minorities have been targets of harassment and discrimination. The authorities in this virtually closed country have retained tight control of the media.

Key to the failure to address impunity or counter the widespread abuses of human rights is President Saparmurat Niyazov's domination of all aspects of life in the country, and the personality cult with which he has surrounded himself.

The authorities have failed to implement recommendations for improving Turkmenistan's human rights record made last year by intergovernmental bodies, including the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN General Assembly.

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

- expressing concern at allegations that Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev was forcibly confined to a psychiatric hospital in the town of Nebitdag on 10 February to punish him for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- explaining to the authorities that Amnesty International regards as a prisoner of conscience anybody who is forcibly confined, including to a psychiatric hospital, for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and calls for their immediate and unconditional release;
- urging the authorities to ensure that Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev is not administered inappropriate treatment.

APPEALS TO:

President Saparmurad Niyazov

744000 g. Ashgabat,
Apparat Prezidenta,
Prezidentu Turkmenistana NIYAZOVU S.A.,
Turkmenistan

Fax: (+993 12) 35 51 12

Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Rashit Meredov,
744000 g. Ashgabat,
pr. Magtymguly, 83,
Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Turkmenistana,
Ministru MEREDOVU R.,
Turkmenistan

Fax: (+993 12) 35 42 41

E-mail: mfatm@online.tm

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES 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 26 March 2004.