

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety/possible prisoner of conscience

TURKMENISTAN

Andrei Zatoka (m), aged 50, environmental activist

Environmental activist Andrei Zatoka was detained on 17 December, as he was traveling to meet fellow activists, and is believed to be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. There are allegations that he was targeted to punish him for his peaceful work as an environmental activist.

Andrei Zatoka was arrested by local police at the airport at his home town of Dashoguz, near the border with Uzbekistan. He had been preparing to fly to the capital, Ashgabat, and then on to Moscow the following day, to meet with members of the International Social and Ecological Union and to spend his holidays with his family in Russia. After he was arrested he managed to send a mobile phone text message informing his colleagues that he was "in trouble" and needed help.

Reportedly, he was initially detained for an alleged breach of public order. It is not clear what gave rise to this accusation.

At the end of December officers of the Dashoguz branch of the Ministry of National Security reportedly searched his apartment and removed his computer and other technical equipment.

Amnesty International learnt on 4 January that Andrei Zatoka had been charged with unlawful acquisition or possession of weapons or explosives (Article 287, part 1 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan) and unlawful circulation of potent or poisonous substances (Article 302, part 1). The first charge is punishable by imprisonment for up to five years and the latter by imprisonment for up to three years.

Andrei Zatoka is now believed to be held in the detention facilities of Dashoguz city police.

Andrei Zatoka has dual Russian and Turkmenistani citizenship. He moved with his family to Turkmenistan from the Russian Federation in 1982, and worked at Kaplankyr National Park until 1992. He is a member of the Council of the International Social and Ecological Union, an umbrella organization of over 340 environmental groups, mainly from the countries of the former Soviet Union. In Turkmenistan he co-chaired an environmental group, the Dashoguz Ecological Club, which opened in December 1992 but was closed down in 2003 as part of the government's clampdown on non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the widespread abuse of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights in Turkmenistan.

The authorities have a record of clamping down on dissidents, including civil society activists. Despite Turkmenistan's obligations under international human rights law, including its commitment to ensure freedom of expression and association, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Turkmenistan is a state party, the authorities have severely restricted the activities of civil society activists and have closed down most NGOs. Opposition politicians have been forced into exile or faced imprisonment and persecution, and no independent political parties can operate openly in Turkmenistan.

Civil society activists have been frequently subjected to interrogation and other harassment by the authorities, and have in some cases been tortured or ill-treated, arbitrarily detained or imprisoned. In recent years increased pressure has forced several civil society activists into exile.

According to official sources, President Saparmurad Niyazov died early on 21 December 2006 of cardiac arrest. As President-for-life he had dominated all aspects of life in the country and the subordination of executive, judicial and legislative powers to the President were key to the failure to address impunity or counter the widespread abuse of human rights. On 21 December the State Security Council and the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health and Medical Industries Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov as acting President. According to the constitution, the powers of the President should have been transferred to the chairperson of the *Mejlis* (Parliament). However, the chairman of the *Mejlis*, Ovezgeldy Atayev, was dismissed the same day and criminal charges were reportedly brought against him. On 26 December the *Halk Maslahaty* (People's Council) approved the nomination of six candidates, including Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, for Presidential elections due to take place on 11 February 2007. Candidates nominated by exiled opposition groups were not included in the list.

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

- expressing concern at allegations that Andrei Zatoka was targeted because of his peaceful work as an environmental activist. Pointing out that if he was detained simply for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression he is a prisoner of conscience, and the authorities must release him immediately and unconditionally;
- pointing out that Turkmenistan is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the rights to freedom of expression and association;
- urging the authorities to ensure that Andrei Zatoka is protected from any form of torture or ill-treatment;
- urging the authorities to ensure that Andrei Zatoka is allowed regular and confidential meetings with a lawyer of his own choosing;
- expressing concern about the continuing clampdown on dissent in Turkmenistan, which has led to many civil society activists, political dissidents, members of religious minority groups and their families being arbitrarily detained, tortured or ill-treated and imprisoned after unfair trials.

APPEALS TO:

Acting President of Turkmenistan
Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov
Presidential Palace
744000 Ashgabat
Turkmenistan

Fax: +993 12 35 51 12

Salutation: Dear Acting President of Turkmenistan

Minister of Foreign Affairs
Rashit Meredov
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Magtymguly Avenue, 83
744000 Ashgabat
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 11 February 2007.