

PUBLIC

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Health concern/Possible prisoner of conscience

16 April 2008

TURKMENISTAN

Valeri Pal, (m), aged 59

Amnesty International recently learnt that Valeri Pal, a social activist, has been detained in Turkmenistan. He is suffering from ill-health and is being denied access to the proper medical treatment he urgently needs. In a petition to the President of Turkmenistan, his wife wrote that "every day that he spends [in detention in those conditions] poses a serious risk to his life".

It became known recently that Valeri Pal, who worked at an oil-refinery in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi for most of his professional life, was detained by police in the city of Turkmenbashi on the night of 21 February. He was reportedly told that he was detained on suspicion of theft in connection with an incident that happened at his workplace in 2004. According to Vyacheslav Mamedov, the director in exile of the non-governmental Democratic Civil Union of Turkmenistan, no charges have yet been brought against Valeri Pal. His relatives were reportedly informed that they could obtain his release by paying a bribe of several thousand dollars to the investigator dealing with the case.

According to Vyacheslav Mamedov, Valeri Pal's peaceful activities as a social activist may be one of the reasons why he was targeted. Valeri Pal has been an activist since 1993 and has for example taken part in protests against the renaming of his town, helped fellow citizens with various social problems and has supported other activists and human rights defenders with his knowledge of information technology.

Speculating about the possible motives for the arrest, Vyacheslav Mamedov has said: "Valeri Pal is a courageous man and became uncomfortable for the city authorities and the management of the oil-refinery. He was aware of the corruption that took place in the company and knew who was involved. They were afraid he knew too much. I believe that certain people in the authorities and the management of the company colluded in fabricating the case against Valeri Pal to get him out of the way."

There are particular concerns for Valeri Pal's health. He suffered a stroke in 2004. Since then the left side of his body has been partly paralyzed and he requires regular medical treatment and exercise. According to his wife, he almost lost his life at the time of the stroke. He also suffers from chronic prostatitis, a prolonged inflammation of the prostate gland. The authorities reportedly asked his relatives to pay large bribes so that they could pass medicine to him that he urgently needs. Valeri Pal's son recently said: "[My father] looks bad [...] He is practically fading away before our eyes." On 20 March an ambulance was called to the detention facility to attend to Valeri Pal. He was reportedly suffering from pain in his heart and high blood pressure.

Due to a lack of exercise and blood circulation in his legs, he reportedly now has problems walking and the colour of his legs has turned black from his feet up to his knees. He has also reportedly developed an ulcer on his left foot or leg and according to his son, his hands are swollen and look like "boxers' gloves". His family also report that he has developed an infection in his gums and that "he is losing teeth". A relative reports that "[h]e cannot even use the toilet without help. In order to reach the toilet one has to climb up a step of 80cm."

According to his son, the quality of food he receives is also very poor. His family is reportedly permitted to pass on a food parcel to him only once a month and "half of the food is taken away by the guards".

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned about the widespread and systematic violations of human rights in Turkmenistan. Impunity for current and past human rights violations by police, security services and other government officials remains pervasive.

Human rights defenders and other independent civil society activists continue to be unable to operate openly and opposition parties do not exist. Many opposition activists live in exile. All media is state-controlled. In recent years Amnesty International continued to receive credible reports of harassment, torture and ill-treatment, arbitrary detention and imprisonment after unfair trials in cases involving human rights defenders and other civil society activists, independent journalists, other individuals critical of the authorities, and former government officials who allegedly fell victim to internal power struggles.

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

- urging the authorities to ensure that Valeri Pal receives access to appropriate medical treatment without delay;
- expressing concern at reports that Valeri Pal has spent over seven weeks in detention without being formally charged and that unless he is charged with a recognizable criminal offence supported by sufficient evidence he should be released immediately;
- pointing out that if Valeri Pal was targeted to punish him for his peaceful work as a social activist Amnesty International would adopt him as a prisoner of conscience and call for his prompt and unconditional release.

APPEALS TO:

If a voice answers on a fax number during office hours, repeat 'fax' until connected; fax machines are often switched off outside office hours.

President

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov
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744000 Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

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Salutation: Dear President Berdymukhamedov

Minister of Foreign Affairs

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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 28 May 2008.