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TURKMENISTAN: "ASTONISHING" ADMISSION OF JUDICIAL ERRORS REINFORCES CONCERNS FOR POSSIBLE PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE, DEATH ROW PRISONERS

President Saparmurad Niyazov's astonishing admission that his country's courts often fail to sentence real criminals and instead prosecute innocent people can be taken as confirmation of what Amnesty International has long argued -- that prisoners of conscience innocent of any crime are sitting in Turkmenistan's prisons, Amnesty International said today.

Announcing the dismissal of the Procurator General on 3 April, the President is said to have complained of widespread incompetence and corruption among Turkmenistan's law enforcement officials.

"President Niyazov's admission also justifies Amnesty International's repeated calls for a moratorium on the death penalty in Turkmenistan: if innocent people are being put to death, that mistake can never be undone."

Amnesty International is currently campaigning for a judicial review in the case of two possible prisoners of conscience serving prison terms in Turkmenistan, Mukhametkuli Aymuradov and Khoshali Garayev.

Convicted in 1995 of anti-state crimes including "attempted terrorism", they are serving 15 and 12 years respectively in a maximum security prison near the Caspian Sea coast. There is strong evidence to suggest that they are innocent of these crimes, and that the case against them was fabricated to punish them for associating with exiled opponents of the Niyazov regime.

The human rights organization is also pressing the Turkmen authorities to clarify the basis for criminal charges against people sentenced to prison terms in connection with an organized anti-government protest in July 1995. Despite an amnesty, at least eight demonstrators are believed to be still in prison.

Amnesty International has repeatedly complained also of the widespread and apparently often arbitrary use of the death penalty in Turkmenistan. Information on this punishment is treated as a state secret, but there are credible reports that last year 123 people were executed for the offence of drug trafficking. Given that Turkmenistan retains the death penalty for 14 offences, the true number of executions is probably much higher.

"We have monitored cases in Turkmenistan of death sentences passed and carried out despite significant doubts about the safety of the conviction, and of grossly inadequate or non-existent procedures for appealing against a death sentence," Amnesty International said.
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