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Turkmenistan: Time to Tell the Truth – What Happened to the “Ashgabat Eight”?

The Turkmen authorities should make a full and immediate disclosure of the facts surrounding the arrest, trial and imprisonment of eight men arrested following a peaceful anti-government demonstration two years ago, Amnesty International said in a new report devoted solely to this issue.

While the Turkmenistan Government has never denied any of Amnesty International's documented analyses of the country's abysmal human rights record, it has continuously ignored requests for information concerning the fate of prisoners such as the “Ashgabat Eight”.

“We strongly suspect that these eight men, whom we regard as political prisoners, have suffered human rights violations,” the organization said. “We urge the Turkmen authorities to confirm whether these suspicions are correct and, if so, to take appropriate steps to redress these violations by finally granting these men justice.”

Hopes that the Turkmen authorities were finally responding to international pressure for improvements in the sphere of human rights were raised last month by reports of a presidential amnesty decree. However, subsequent inquiries by Amnesty International have raised doubts that the review of sentences foreseen by the amnesty will be extended to political cases.

The organization's concerns are particularly pressing in the light of Turkmenistan President Niyazov's reported admission on 3 April 1997 that the country's courts often fail to sentence real criminals and instead prosecute “innocent people”. Amnesty fears that the “Ashgabat Eight” are among these people and appeals for confirmation that they received fair trials.

These eight men were detained following a peaceful demonstration in 12 July 1995, when hundreds of people defied Turkmenistan's highly repressive government by marching to the centre of the capital Ashgabat in protest against economic hardships. When police calls for the demonstrators to disperse were ignored, at least 80 people were taken to police headquarters, where detainees were reportedly beaten.

Branding the demonstration an “anti-social provocation” by people “high on drugs and alcohol”, the Turkmen authorities denied it had been a political protest. Although most detainees were released soon after their arrest, many were called back for further questioning. Others who were not present at the demonstration were later detained on the basis of having instigated it.

Nothing was known about the fate of these detainees until reports emerged in January 1996 that 20 people convicted and imprisoned for various, apparently minor offences had been released under an amnesty. However, another five defendants convicted of more serious crimes remained in prison, as did two others convicted of the minor offence of “malicious hooliganism”. These are seven of the “Ashgabat Eight”.

The eighth man, Charymyrat Amandurdyev, was reportedly arrested in February 1996 in connection with the demonstration. His subsequent fate is unclear, but he is believed to still be detained although no reports of a trial against him have emerged.

There have been allegations that the trials which resulted in the conviction of seven of the “Ashgabat Eight” were held in secret or behind closed doors. If so, this is in clear violation of the international standards for fair trial to which Turkmenistan is bound.

“We are also seeking assurance from the Turkmen authorities that the eight defendants who remain in prison in connection with the demonstration were not tortured or ill-treated while in pre-trial detention, and that the “Ashgabat Eight” were not compelled, by force or threats, to testify against themselves and confess guilt,” the human rights organization said.

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For further information, to arrange an interview or to receive a copy of the report, entitled “The ‘Ashgabat Eight’: Two Years On, Time for the Truth”, please contact:

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