

Stop Persecution of Turkmen Civic Activists!

Statement from Human Rights Organizations

July 23, 2020

We, representatives of human rights organizations from various countries, express our serious concern about the growing pressure on Turkmen civic activists inside the country and abroad, pressure on their relatives in Turkmenistan, and the threat of forced return to the country by participants in the protest movement outside of Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive states in the world. Since the summer of 2019 there has been a significant growth in protests among communities of Turkmen migrants abroad (in Turkey, Russia, Cyprus, USA, etc.), and, according to some information, in Turkmen society itself.

A new wave of protest action was provoked by the inaction of the authorities after the catastrophic hurricane of April 27, 2020 in Lebap and Mary velayats. There were reports of damage to buildings, long-term power outages, and sewer and water supply failures. The authorities blocked entry into the affected regions and persecuted activists who tried to inform the world via the internet about what was happening. Unconfirmed information spread about public protests, including the blocking of roads in one of the regions of Turkmenabad on May 13.

On May 15, Turkmen activists living in Turkey initiated the first protest action in front of the Turkmen consulate in Istanbul. Around 20 people criticized the authorities for failure to provide assistance to the suffering population in the regions. They spoke about social problems and demanded the resignation of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

On May 20, a similar action took place in Northern Cyprus, with the participation of 35-40 Turkmen activists. On May 29, another action took place in front of the Turkmen consulate in Istanbul.

On June 26, a group of activists dressed in t-shirts with anti-presidential symbols marched through the streets of Istanbul chanting slogans demanding the resignation of the head of Turkmenistan. When the demonstration was over, unknown persons tried to kidnap the organizer, Khanum Rasulova, but she was protected.

Information about the protest demonstrations was widely distributed over the internet. More and more participants joined, with an expanding list of demands.

On June 28, on the eve of President Berdymukhamedov's birthday, Turkmen citizens living in the United States held a demonstration in front of the UN Headquarters in New York City, and in front of the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Washington, DC.

On July 16, Turkmen activists in New York organized an airplane flight with a banner containing a portrait of Berdymukhamedov, the Turkmen flag, and the inscription, "Dictator of Turkmenistan! SOS!"

On July 19, Turkmen citizens in Istanbul planned to hold a rally at the Turkmen consulate demanding the president's resignation, criticizing corruption and the government's hiding the truth

about the coronavirus, etc. It was also supposed to demand the consulate exchange expired passports for new ones (as provided by the law on migration), and provide an opportunity for those with valid documents to travel home to support their loved ones. Hundreds of Turkmen citizens planned to participate in the action.

Because of the large number of participants, the Turkish authorities forbade the rally, claiming that there was a limitation because of the coronavirus. The Turkish police began arresting people even before the rally began. More than 80 Turkmen were detained on that day. It turned out that the consulate of Turkmenistan had filed a complaint with the Turkish authorities before the fact, providing the last names of five of the activists, who, allegedly, had disturbed the work of Turkmen diplomats and threatened them with violence.

Almost all those who were detained were released after 4-5 hours. Only Dursoltan Taganova, age 29, was held under guard. She is well-known as one of the leaders of the newly created Turkish branch of the opposition movement, "Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan." Her name was included in the consul's complaint. According to her lawyer, the consulate's claims were not confirmed. However, Taganova's documents are expired (as they are for many Turkmen in Istanbul), and she is threatened with deportation. At present she must pay a fine of 2,000 Turkish lira. The court will decide whether other conditions that fall under the migration legislation will apply to her.

While the police were dealing with the detained Turkmen, dozens of activists waited for their release in a park next to the consulate. Some of them held an unsanctioned demonstration in a modified format. They divided themselves into groups of 10-12 people, unfurled posters in various locations around the city, and demanded the resignation of President Berdymukhamedov. One of the groups organized a sit-in at the park.

In an attempt to put down the wave of protest actions, the Turkmenistan authorities put more pressure on activists and their relatives. Several Turkmen students who are studying in Turkey reported that representatives of the Turkmen secret police approached them at their dormitories demanding that they show them private correspondence on their phones, copied down their contacts, and looked at their photographs. If photos or contacts of activists seen in the protests were found, the students were threatened with deportation and subsequent imprisonment in Turkmenistan.

In Turkey, Russia, and other countries there have been cases of intimidation by telephone, accompanied by threats of physical violence.

There are also reports from Turkmenistan of pressure on activists and their relatives. There are unconfirmed reports of attempts in recent months to hold protests and to distribute leaflets criticizing the government's policies.

A Turkmen activist who appeared on YouTube using the pseudonym "Vepa Chopan" stated that the authorities in Turkmenistan were putting pressure on his parents, his wife, and children, demanding that he "shut up" and stop making presentations on the Internet.

On June 16 in Bezmeinsk Etrap of Ashgabat, another activist, Murad Dushemov, was detained. He had appeared on YouTube with a call for the unification of the opposition. Several days later he was placed under house arrest.

A friend in Turkmenistan of Khanum Rasulova (organizer of the June 26 protest action in Istanbul) was repeatedly summoned to the local administration of the Ministry of National Security

where he was beaten. Officials demanded that he get her to refuse to participate in the protest movement. On June 24-25, he was held in the Ministry of National Security for a day and was again severely beaten and denied food and water. There have been reports of pressure on Rasulova's relatives.

In July, three sisters, who are activists well-known in chats under the name of "Gulnar," were intimidated in Bayram-Ali by the police, who threatened them with physical harm.

This is far from a complete list of information of this kind.

Turkmenistan has faced serious political, economic, and social problems. Contrary to official statements, negative trends are growing, which leads to a rapid increase in tension in the society. However, the existing political model, contrary to the Constitution and the requirements of international law, does not allow citizens to freely express their opinions and participate in a real way in the governance of the country.

In this situation, we call on the government of Turkmenistan to abandon the practice of suppressing dissent, to immediately end the persecution of activists, and to begin a dialogue with emerging civil society. This is the only way that the escalation of political confrontation can be stopped, and is an opportunity for a constructive solution to the accumulated problems.

Refusal to engage in dialogue, attempts to conceal problems, and an increase in repression could have dangerous consequences for Turkmenistan and other states in the region.

Tadzhigul Begmedova, Turkmen Helsinki Fund
Farid Tukhatullin, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights
Vitaly Ponomarev, Human Rights Center, "Memorial" (Russia)
Krasimir Kanev, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
Yuri Dzhibladze, Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
Kate Watters, Crude Accountability (USA)
Svetlana Gannushkina, Committee "Civil Assistance" (Russia)
Vyacheslav Mamedov, Democratic Civic Union of Turkmenistan
Olga Zakharova, Freedom Files (Poland)
Valentin Gefter, Institute for Human Rights (Russia)
Ivar Dale, Norwegian Helsinki Committee

This statement is also supported by Turkmen civic activists, whose names must be kept anonymous to ensure their safety.