

Turkmen Authorities Trying to Silence Voices of Protesters

According to reports from Turkmenistan, the authorities are increasing its pressure on civic activists, in an attempt to prevent the dissemination of criticism on the internet, and suppress information about street protests by Turkmen ex-pats overseas. (For more information, see: http://memohrc.org/en/news_old/stop-persecution-turkmen-civic-activists).

Many have activists described attempts to intimidate and pressure their relatives.

One participant in an online dissident communities, 24-year-old Reimberdy Kurbanov, was detained by police in Turkmenabat on August 8^t and currently remains in custody. Employees of the Ministry of National Security (MNS) confiscated his computer, cell phone, and his other electronic information devices.

A resident of Mary region, (name not disclosed) who at the end of July tried to send photos to foreign media, was placed under administrative arrest for ten days.

Below are brief descriptions of some of the stories provided by activists from “Turkmenia- Unite!” and “Democratic Choice Turkmenistan”. Due to the threat of persecution, not all names can be disclosed at this time.

Azat Isakov, a 36-year-old native of Turkmenabad, has lived in Russia for about 10 years. The creator of dozens of videos, he is known on the internet by the nickname “Azat Turkmen”. Since 2019 he had been an active participant in the group “Turkmenia- Unite!” At the end of April 2020, he stopped concealing his identity, stating that he was “tired of being silent about disempowerment in Turkmenistan” and that “to live in fear is not truly living, but merely surviving.”

In June his parents in Turkmenabad received several phone calls from people claiming they were Ministry of National Security staff, threatening to find and punish their son. Several activists in Istanbul received similar, threatening phone calls On June 27th, a wanted poster for Azat, with the caption “Traitor of the Motherland”, appeared at the local police station.

On July 9th security officers arrived at Isakov’s parents’ home and threatened to hold him accountable if he did not cease posting on YouTube. On July 24th, officers and two people in civilian clothes came to their home. They asked questions about Isakov’s work and whereabouts, asked for his number, collected the telephones of all residents of the home and checked their contacts, call, messages, photographs, frequently used apps, etc. In early August, a video appeared on YouTube that featured two men who served in the army together with Isakov (2004- 2006), condemning his internet activities. Fearing being forcibly returned to Turkmenistan, on July 31, 2020, Azat Isakov applied for asylum in Russia. Currently the government is refusing, without explanation, to issue a passport to his older son, who is in Turkmenistan.

45-year-old **Hamida Babadjanova** is a Muslim from the city of Kunya-Urgench in northern Turkmenistan. Since 2016 she has been living in Izmir, Turkey. As of May 12, 2020, she has been openly active on YouTube in the group “Turkmenia- Unite!”. In her videos she calls on the president of Turkmenistan, Berdymuhamedov, to remember the Almighty, and to admit his mistakes. On June 16th, her mother, who lives in Kunya-Urgench was visited by a regional official who said his name was Batyr and warned her that Hamida must stop posting on the internet. The following day, Batyr again visited, and took down information about Hamida’s relatives, including her three sisters and her brother. On June 22nd, authorities questioned her sister’s husband, specifically about her whereabouts, when she left the country, her occupation, etc.

On June 25th, Hamida's mother, Yakutjan Babadjanova, and her older brother, Umar Babadjanov were called to hyakimlik (local government administration), where officials demanded that Hamida stop posting on the internet, and threatened to arrest her as a "traitor to the State" should she ever return home.

The day after a July 19 protest in Istanbul, which Hamida participated in, her younger sister Dilfuza was called to the police station in Kunya-Urgench. The "discussion" was conducted by an officer who introduced himself as Nurmurat, in the presence of the same Batyr. They demanded that Hamida delete all her videos from the internet, and that she "stop posting." Dilfuza, who had come with her husband, stated that her sister was compelled to defend her rights, since the Turkmen Consulate to renew her passports put her in an impossible situation. On July 22nd the two other sisters, Hurshida and Firuza were summoned to the police station, although according to reports, they refused to attend these "informal conversations."

B.D. (name not disclosed) was detained by the Turkish police during the July 19 protest in Istanbul. By that evening more than 80 detained Turkmen (apart from Dursoltan Taganova) had been released, although they were warned that their information would be passed on to the Turkmenistan Consulate. By July 21st, B.D. received a message that his parents in the Lebap region had been taken to the Ministry of National Security. It later came out that security officers had threatened them that they could lose their jobs if their son did not stop participating in protests, and had referred to him as an "enemy of the people." To reassure his parents, B.D. told them that he had been mistakenly detained on his way to the beach, and that he hadn't been planning to go to any protests.

Similar pressure was applied to the parents of a Turkmen citizen who has lived in Istanbul for around 10 years, and is known in the Turkmen online network as "Karol TM.TM." He was also detained by Turkish police during the July 19 protest. He gave police an invalid number for his mobile phone in the detention report. Later, Ministry of National Security employees forced his father in Turkmenistan to give them the correct number.

G.R. (name not disclosed) is an active participant in the "Turkmenia-Unite!" group. She attracted the attention of security officers in the fall of 2019, when she participated in planning an opposition conference in Istanbul scheduled for October 26. The conference did not end up taking place because of interference by the Turkish police, who were responding to a request from the Turkmen government not to allow "provocations aimed at the deterioration of Turkmen-Turkish relations." In the beginning of June 2020, G.R.'s sister in Turkmenabad reported in a telephone call, that employees of the housing administration had come and took down all her personal information: her autobiographical information, and details about her relatives and all members of her family. Around this time her sister sent a text message, asking her not to like or comment on any internet articles or publications that had to do with the situation in Turkmenistan. On June 4th, Ministry of National Security staff also came to the workplace of G.R.'s brother and accused her of "treason against the state", for which she could be criminally charged. G.R. wrote to her brother that she was not involved in anything illegal and asked him to write down the names of the security officers, if they bothered him again.

S.A. (name not disclosed) is a Turkmen exchange student studying in Minsk, who in April was denied a visa extension by the government of Belarus, which referenced a recommendation by the Turkmen government. Because of restrictions related to the coronavirus, he cannot leave the country.

In mid-July he established contact with a foreign-based protest movement, passing along information about Turkmenistan, and making statements connected with youth activism in the country, etc. He soon began receiving threats from A.D. in Turkey, who is known for his connections with the security services in Turkmenistan. A.D. stated that they knew student's identity, they knew about his messages on chats, and that employees of the Ministry of National Security were waiting for him in his home country. His father in Turkmenistan received threats from security officials.

U.M. (name not disclosed), an active participant in Turkmen on Telegram chat groups, applied to the Turkmen consulate in Kyiv for a new passport in the spring of 2020. Soon thereafter, city police were coming to her mother in Turkmenistan asking "who instructed her" to go to the consulate, and why didn't she want to get a new passport in Turkmenistan. They threatened her mother, and one of her relatives was taken that same day for interrogation.

This is only a small sample of dozens of known cases of the authorities' attempts to suppress the protest movement formed among Turkmen citizens abroad. Human rights organizations believe find these attempts at suppression illegal and contrary to Turkmenistan's international obligations.

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