



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

TURKMENISTAN: APPEAL CASE

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Government attempts to silence the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation

Amnesty International (AI) is seriously concerned at attempts by the authorities to stop the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF) from carrying out its human rights work. Some of these attempts are believed to be part of a government policy to prevent information about human rights violations from leaving the virtually closed country, and so reaching the attention of the international community. The targeting of the THF is part of a larger pattern of intimidation by the authorities of civil society activists and their relatives and, more generally, of the clampdown on dissent.

Seventy-nine -year-old Sazak Begmedov still in internal exile

Exactly two years ago, on 31 August 2003, Sazak Begmedov, the father of the THF director Tadzhiagul Begmedova, was stopped by four police officers near his home in the capital Ashgabat and forcibly resettled to Dashoguz near the border with Uzbekistan. AI believes that Sazak Begmedov was targeted in connection with his daughter's human rights work. Shortly before the forced resettlement, Tadzhiagul Begmedova had announced the formation of the THF, and had publicly alleged that two men imprisoned in connection with the alleged assassination attempt on the President in November 2002 had died in prison as a result of torture. The officers reportedly beat and kicked Sazak Begmedov on their way to the airport, where they forced him onto a plane to Dashoguz. Police accompanied him on the flight and confiscated his passport. He was instructed to regularly report to the police in Dashoguz. The head of the local police department reportedly refused to give an explanation as to why he was being resettled. The police refused to register his complaint about the beatings although Sazak Begmedov showed a medical certificate documenting injuries to his body, concussion and injuries to the kidneys. Shortly afterwards, in the night of 3 to 4 September, Sazak Begmedov had a heart attack and had to be hospitalized for more than two weeks. He was unable to receive his pension payments for several months as he was told that he could only receive the money at his permanent place of residence in Ashgabat. In February 2005, the house where Sazak Begmedov lives in Dashoguz was reportedly put under surveillance for two weeks and his telephone was cut off for about a month following a phone call on 25 February from a representative of a European embassy who wanted to arrange a meeting between Sazak Begmedov and diplomats. Sazak Begmedov is believed to be in poor health and suffers from tuberculosis.

Further examples of harassment and intimidation

The THF director Tadzhiagul Begmedova, who now lives in exile, told AI that since announcing the formation of the THF in August 2003 she has received numerous emails threatening her with repercussions including causing harm to her children, who also live outside Turkmenistan, if she continued criticizing the human rights situation in Turkmenistan. Reportedly, several of her contacts in Turkmenistan who passed on information about the human rights situation in the country are under close surveillance; they have been called to the police many times who threatened them with dismissal from their workplace and with pressure on their children or elderly relatives if they did not end their work for the THF. Their phone lines are also frequently cut off.

In May 2004 several officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and one officer from the Procurator's office reportedly tried to obtain information about Tadzhiagul Begmedova and the

work of the THF from her sister Akchagul Kakaeva. Akchagul Kakaeva is serving a prison term of eight years in Dashoguz women's colony in a case not related to the human rights work of the THF. One official also reportedly mentioned to her that Tadzhiagul Begmedova had given interviews to the Turkmen Service of the US-funded *Radio Liberty*. This Prague-based radio station is one of the very few remaining sources of alternative information available to people inside Turkmenistan and has been highly critical of the regime and its human rights record. Akchagul Kakaeva was reportedly interrogated in the open air in extreme heat several times in the course of the day. Other prisoners were also interrogated. However, they were reportedly able to return to their wards after their interrogations while Akchagul Kakaeva was forced to stand in the direct sun between her interrogations and up until the officers finished their work for the day. By the end of the day Akchagul Kakaeva reportedly suffered from bleeding in her right eye. She was so exhausted that she was unable to move or even raise her head without assistance and had to be guided back into her ward by prison guards.

In April 2005 the Ministry of National Security summoned several of Tadzhiagul Begmedova's former colleagues, acquaintances from university and fellow students of her relatives for questioning. They were asked for information about Tadzhiagul Begmedova, the THF's work and the names of Tadzhiagul Begmedova's sources of information in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan: background information

AI is seriously concerned about widespread abuses of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights in Turkmenistan. The authorities have engaged in a clampdown on dissent and religious freedom for many years.

They have in many cases targeted relatives of dissidents to put pressure on the dissidents. AI has documented cases where family members of dissidents including dissidents in exile have been summoned to the Ministry of National Security, dismissed from their work or threatened with confiscation of their flats.

Despite Turkmenistan's obligations under international human rights law, the authorities of Turkmenistan have made it impossible for independent civil society activists to operate openly. Civil society activists have been frequent targets of interrogation and harassment by the authorities, and have in some cases been arbitrarily detained or imprisoned. Several have been forced into exile in recent years. Most of them were political dissidents and their relatives.

In addition to the pressure on the THF, another human rights group the authorities have tried to silence is the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TI). In March 2005, for example, Ruslan Tukhbatullin, the brother of Farid Tukhbatullin, a former prisoner of conscience and the founder of the TI in exile, was forced to hand in his resignation from his post in the military because of his family relationship with Farid Tukhbatullin (See AI Index EUR 61/004/2005 for further information).

The authorities have in many instances prevented civil society activists from meeting representatives of foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe on their visits to Turkmenistan. They have been threatened by the Ministry of National Security with serious repercussions if they attend such meetings or address any issues that may shed a negative light on the authorities. In addition, in many cases the telephones of activists were apparently disconnected throughout the time of the visit of a foreign delegation.

Please send politely worded appeals to the authorities of Turkmenistan to arrive as quickly as possible, in Turkmen, Russian, English or your own language:

- Express concern about the ongoing clampdown on dissent in Turkmenistan as a result of which many civil society activists, political dissidents, members of religious minority groups and their families have been subjected to human rights violations including harassment, arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, and imprisonment after unfair trials.

- Express particular concern at reports that the authorities have taken steps aimed at stopping the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF) from carrying out its human rights work. This has included the summoning, interrogation and intimidation of relatives, acquaintances and former fellow students and colleagues of the THF's director Tadzhi gul Begmedova.
- Express concern at reports that Tadzhi gul Begmedova's father Sazak Begmedov was forcibly resettled to Dashoguz on 31 August 2003 and ill-treated by the policemen who detained him. Urge the authorities to promptly lift the restrictions on Sazak Begmedov's movement and to open a thorough and independent investigation into the allegations that he was ill-treated with those found responsible brought to justice.
- Urge them to ensure respect for the human rights of human rights defenders and ensure that they are able to carry out their peaceful activities free from harassment and without threat of detention and imprisonment and other human rights violations.

PLEASE SEND YOUR APPEALS TO:

President of Turkmenistan:

Prezident Turkmenistana Saparmurat A. NIYAZOV; Apparat Prezidenta; 744000 ASHGABAT; TURKMENISTAN

Fax: (+993 12) 35 51 12

Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Foreign Affairs:

Ministr Rashid MEREDOV; Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Turkmenistana; 83 pr. Magtymguly; 744000 ASHGABAT; TURKMENISTAN

Fax: (+993 12) 35 42 41, **e-mail:** mfatm@online.tm

Salutation: Dear Minister

Chairman of the Ministry of National Security:

Predsedatelyu Ministerstva Natsionalnoi Bezapasnosti Geldimuhammedtu Asyrmuhammedovu; 91 pr. Magtymguly; 744000 ASHGABAT; TURKMENISTAN

Fax: (+993 12) 51 07 55

Salutation: Dear Chairman

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Turkmenistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND ANY REPLIES FROM THE AUTHORITIES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. (Europe and Central Asia Program; Eurasia team, Amnesty International; 1 Easton Street; London WC1X 0DW; United Kingdom)