

Urgent Action In Focus

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Keeping up the pressure: Former POC Farid Tukhbatullin's campaign for change in Turkmenistan

"Turkmenistan has an appalling human rights record and there doesn't appear to be any political will to fundamentally improve the situation. At the same time Turkmenistan has reacted to international pressure in some instances, especially on individual cases such as Farid Tukhbatullin's detention. This is why UAs are an especially effective type of action with regard to Turkmenistan."

Anna Sunder-Plassmann, Amnesty International's researcher on Turkmenistan

In recent years, many news stories in the world's media about Turkmenistan have focused on the personality cult surrounding the country's President, Saparmurat Niyazov, and on a series of extravagant and often comical ideas and projects that he has introduced. He has, after all, adopted the title of *Turkmenbashi*, or "Father of all Turkmen" and has renamed the months of the year after himself, his mother and his book *Rukhnama* (Book of the Soul), a core element of his personality cult. In August 2004, he even ordered the construction of a giant ice palace in the Turkmen desert, though it has not yet been built.

However, much of the press attention has ignored the cost of Niyazov's tight control over the country. The human rights situation in Turkmenistan is characterized by grave violations of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Civil society activists (including human rights defenders, and ecological activists), political dissidents, independent journalists, religious minorities, and their families face harassment and imprisonment or are forced into exile. The testimony of Farid

Tukhbatullin, a human rights and ecological activist from Dashoguz in eastern Turkmenistan, illustrates the risks associated with promoting human rights in a country where freedom of expression and association are extremely limited.



Farid Tukhbatullin © AI

Jailed for defending human rights

In November 2002, Farid Tukhbatullin was among the participants at a conference just outside Moscow organized by human rights groups. Later that month, unknown armed men

attacked President Niyazov's motorcade in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. The President was unharmed. The authorities treated the attack as a failed assassination and an attempt to seize power and overthrow the constitutional order.

In December 2002, Farid Tukhbatullin was detained in Dashoguz. He was accused of illegally crossing the border from Uzbekistan into Turkmenistan, as well as refusing to disclose information about the plans of exiled opposition groups to carry out the alleged assassination attempt, which the authorities claim were discussed at the conference. Amnesty International - whose delegate attended the conference - believes that the charges against Farid Tukhbatullin were brought solely to punish him for exercising his internationally recognized right to freedom of expression and for his peaceful work as a civil society activist. The former charge relates to an incident when Turkmen border guards, for reasons unknown, failed to stamp his passport upon his return from Uzbekistan.

Farid Tukhbatullin was flown from Dashoguz to Ashgabat, where he was held at the Ministry of National Security. He says, "I was held in a 2 x 3 metre cell, with three other men. The only time I left the cell was during bathroom visits twice a day. I was not allowed out of the cell to exercise for one and a half months after my detention, and I suffered health problems due to lack of movement. In detention I had no contact with my family, and only saw my lawyer twice. The third time I saw my lawyer was during my trial."

He spent three months in detention before his trial at Azadlyk district court in Ashgabat on 4 March 2003, which was grossly unfair. No witnesses testified at his trial, local and international trial monitors were denied access to the court, and his mother and two other relatives were the only members of his family

permitted to attend. Groups and organizations including Amnesty International had submitted statements to Farid Tukhbatullin's lawyer in support of his case, but the judge deemed these to be inadmissible. According to Farid Tukhbatullin, the testimony of one Secret Service agent was the only "evidence" supporting the charge that he had failed to disclose information about the alleged plot to kill President Niyazov. After only four hours he was found guilty of the charges and sentenced him to three years' imprisonment.

Following his detention, Amnesty International declared Farid Tukhbatullin to be a prisoner of conscience and called for his prompt and unconditional release. The UA network was mobilized on his behalf (see UA 04/03, EUR 61/001/2003, 7 January 2003, and follow-ups).

Farid Tukhbatullin is convinced that Amnesty International's campaigning played a key role in his release. "Of course it helped me to be recognized as a prisoner of conscience", he said.

"The support of Amnesty International and other organizations, as well as the governments of foreign countries, helped to put pressure on the authorities to release me."

Among the thousands of people who took action on his case were 92 young members of AI Canada's UA network, who sent old keys along with their appeals to the authorities in Turkmenistan, as a potent reminder that his cell door should be unlocked.

Evidently feeling the eyes of the world upon him, President Niyazov announced Farid Tukhbatullin's release on Turkmen television on 1 April 2003. The following day, less than a month after receiving a three-year sentence, Farid Tukhbatullin walked free. Before he was released, he was forced to sign a "confession", acknowledging his "guilt" of the charges against him, and promising not to

engage in any "illegal activity" in the future. The "confession" was published in Turkmen newspapers on the day he was freed.

One week earlier, the then Chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had raised his case during a visit to Turkmenistan. Two weeks after Farid Tukhbatullin's release, the UN Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution on the country, expressing "grave concern" about the human rights situation, including "the persistence of a governmental policy based on the repression of all political opposition activities," "the suppression of independent media and freedom of expression," and "restrictions on the exercise of the freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

Forced into exile

Once freed, it became clear that Farid Tukhbatullin would no longer be able to carry out his work as an activist and ecologist due to the restrictions placed on him. He was told by Security Ministry officials that he was permitted neither to meet with any foreigners, nor to leave the country. In addition, a senior official at the Ministry for the Protection of the Environment contacted several ecological groups and urged them "to exclude Tukhbatullin from the ecological community." Farid Tukhbatullin explains, "I was placed under house arrest for three months, and I couldn't find a job. Eventually I was granted permission to visit my relatives in Russia. The authorities in Turkmenistan expected me to return, but I never went back."

Farid Tukhbatullin now lives in western Europe, where he has formed a human rights group, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. The names of the group's members and other contacts inside Turkmenistan have to be kept secret in order to protect them from repercussions. "We monitor the education system,

freedom of association, and the oppression of national minority groups," he explains. The authorities pursue a policy of *Turkmenization*, and Russian, Uzbek and Kazakh minority schools have been closed. Children in schools have to wear traditional Turkmen clothing, and newspapers in languages of other ethnic groups have been shut down. The only one that remains is a state-owned Russian-language newspaper."



Farid Tukhbatullin speaks to the media in Moscow, watched by fellow human rights defender Irina Toustsiik. ©AI

Farid Tukhbatullin's brother harassed

In March 2005 the Turkmen authorities forced Farid Tukhbatullin's brother Ruslan to resign from his senior position in the Turkmen army in order to put pressure on Farid Tukhbatullin to stop his human rights work. The Secret Service had reportedly requested Ruslan Tukhbatullin's dismissal because Farid "attacks Turkmenistan too much." Ruslan is likely to lose his home, which is owned by the military, and has been told by an army official that "if he was able to find work at all, it would be somewhere outside this region in some village far away." Amnesty International is calling on the authorities in Turkmenistan to stop the harassment of Ruslan Tukhbatullin and of other family members of dissidents, religious

believers, journalists and civil society activists (see AI Appeal Case EUR 61/004/2005, May 2005).

"Keep on going!"

Farid Tukhbatullin emphasizes the need for sustained pressure on Turkmenistan to improve its human rights record. "Turkmenistan has taken some formal steps to improve human rights because of international pressure, but nothing has really changed," he says. For example, in an effort to combat international criticism of their human rights record, the Turkmen authorities annulled legislation outlawing the activities of unregistered non-governmental organizations, but it is still impossible for independent civil society groups to operate openly. Despite the limited nature of the steps that have been taken, they demonstrate that the Turkmen authorities are far from immune to international pressure.

Farid Tukhbatullin has also campaigned for change by sharing his experiences with audiences in a number of different countries. He recently completed a speakers' tour organized by Amnesty International as part of their ongoing Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Expression project in Eurasia. He and two other human rights defenders, Irina Toustsik from Belarus and Shakhman Akbulatov from the Russian Federation, gave their personal testimony of living in countries where the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association are often flouted. The tour took them to a number of European countries, starting with Russia and Ukraine. All three human

rights defenders participated in actions, meetings and media interviews to publicize the human rights abuses in their countries. Farid Tukhbatullin had been afraid that his participation in the speakers' tour could endanger his brother Ruslan, but there appear to have been no repercussions for his family. "Maybe the authorities were too scared to act", said Farid.

Amnesty International will continue to fight for the rights of human rights defenders in the Eurasia region, and will launch a campaigning action on their website (www.amnesty.org) in October 2005.

Farid Tukhbatullin is determined to continue his human rights work. "I cannot imagine not doing what I am doing now", he says. "I risked much in Turkmenistan, but it would betray my ideals and my friends still in the country if I stopped this important work."

He was amazed to learn that the Urgent Action network numbers at least 95,000 activists. When asked if he had a message to pass on to those who took action on his case, he said,

"Thank you for the work that you have done for me and my family. The work that you do has produced results. It is important in Turkmenistan and around the world. The UA was a huge stimulus for me and for other human rights defenders in Turkmenistan. Keep on going!"