



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TURKMENISTAN: APPEAL CASE

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Religious leader Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah remains in prison and allegations of beatings go unpunished

Amnesty International is concerned about the continued imprisonment following a secret trial last year of former Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah. There are allegations that he was targeted for expressing dissent and because of his ethnic origin as an Uzbek.

Exactly one year ago, in the night from 23 to 24 May 2004, officers of the Interior Ministry reportedly beat Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah in the maximum-security prison in the Caspian port town of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk). According to the international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah “suffered significantly”. To Amnesty International’s knowledge, the authorities have not investigated the allegations and none of the perpetrators has been brought to justice.

On 2 March 2004 Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was sentenced to 22 years’ imprisonment on treason charges by Azatlyk district court in Ashgabat in a secret trial with the first five years to be served in a maximum-security prison. He was accused of involvement in the alleged assassination attempt on President Niyazov in November 2002. The President had removed Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah from his post as chief mufti and deputy chair of the *Gengeshi* (Council) for Religious Affairs in January 2003.

There are allegations that the charges against Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah were fabricated and that he was targeted for expressing dissent. For example, he was believed to have repeatedly objected to the extensive use of the President’s book *Rukhnama [Book of the Soul]* in mosques. In addition, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah did not advocate the imposition of the death penalty on the suspects in the November 2002 alleged assassination attempt on the President while other senior officials called for the reintroduction of the death penalty. Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah’s expression of his opinion on this issue, before President Niyazov himself decided that the death penalty would not be reintroduced, could have been perceived as undermining the President’s authority. There were also allegations that one of the reasons for targeting him was his Uzbek ethnicity. The government launched a new wave of pressure on ethnic minorities at the end of October 2003, removing ethnic minorities from particularly influential posts and replacing them with ethnic Turkmen.

Background information:

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the widespread abuse of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights in Turkmenistan. In recent years civil society activists, political dissidents, members of religious minority groups as well as their families have in many cases been subjected to human rights violations including harassment, arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, and imprisonment after unfair trials. Many dissidents, members of religious minorities and their families have been forced into exile in recent years and thousands are believed to be on a “special list” preventing them from leaving the country.

Key to the failure to address impunity or counter the widespread abuse of human rights is the subordination of executive and legislative powers to the President, and the ruthless repression of any forms of dissent. This domination by President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov over all aspects of life in the country is reflected in the personality cult he has surrounded himself with. The President’s, portrait and quotations from his books and poems

are omnipresent in the country. The President's book *Rukhnama* is a core element of his personality cult.

Religious freedom in Turkmenistan is severely restricted. Religious minority groups have been under particular pressure. However, although the two main religions -- Russian Orthodoxy and Sunni Islam -- have had a privileged status they have also been under strict state control and members of these groups have apparently also been targeted and punished when daring to express any kind of dissent. All imams in state-approved mosques are appointed by the *Gengeshi* for Religious Affairs. Leaders of both religious communities are instructed to promote the President's personality cult. In response to government orders, imams have placed copies of the *Rukhnama* in prominent places in mosques and both imams and Russian Orthodox priests are expected to quote from the *Rukhnama* in their prayers. The walls of a new mosque, inaugurated in the President's home village of Kipchak in October 2004, show inscriptions of verses of the Koran alongside quotations from the *Rukhnama*. An inscription above the gateway leading to the entrance of the mosque reads "*Rukhnama* is a holy book. The Koran is Allah's book."

Apart from Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, at least 59 people have been convicted in unfair trials to sentences ranging between five years' imprisonment and life imprisonment for their alleged involvement in the November 2002 alleged assassination attempt on the President; three of them were sentenced *in absentia*. They were sentenced in December 2002 and January 2003. Amnesty International received credible reports that many of the defendants were tortured and ill-treated in pre-trial detention. At least two are believed to have died in custody as a result of torture and harsh prison conditions. No investigation has been opened into any of these allegations and it is believed that no one has been brought to justice for these alleged human rights violations. Up until now, the prisoners have been held incommunicado.

Recommended actions:

Please send courteous letters in English, Russian, Turkmen or your own language (if you write in Russian it would be good to apologize for not writing in Turkmen, explaining that you do not know the language). If a voice answers on a fax number during office hours, repeat 'fax' until connected; fax machines are often switched off outside office hours - five hours ahead of GMT. If the fax does not work, please send your letter by post.

- expressing concern that Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in a secret trial in March 2004, allegedly to punish him for expressing dissent. If the allegations are confirmed, such practice would be in violation of Article 19 ('freedom of expression') of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Turkmenistan is a party, and Amnesty International would regard him as a prisoner of conscience and call for his prompt and unconditional release;
- Expressing concern that no investigation appears to have been carried out into the allegation that officers of the Interior Ministry beat Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah in the maximum-security prison in the night from 23 to 24 May 2004 and urging the authorities to open a prompt and impartial investigation into the allegation with the results made public and those found responsible brought to justice;
- Calling on the authorities to ensure respect for human rights of the religious believers and that they are able to carry out their peaceful activities free from harassment and without fear of detention and imprisonment and other human rights violations;
- Urging the authorities to promptly undertake fundamental reforms of domestic law and institutions to implement the country's obligations under the human rights treaties that Turkmenistan is a party to.

Please address 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

COPIES TO:

Diplomatic representatives of Turkmenistan accredited to your country.

Director of the Prison:
Respublika Turkmenistan
745000 g. Turkmenbashi
Uchrezhdeniye BL-T5
Direktoru tyurmy
TURKMENISTAN

You can also send a letter to **Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah** to give him moral support. Important: You may mention Amnesty International in your letters to him, but please be aware that correspondence from abroad will be subject to very strict control by the authorities, so do not raise any political issues. Write to:

Respublika Turkmenistan
745000 g. Turkmenbashi
Uchrezhdeniye 25/2
Zaklyuchennomu Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah
TURKMENISTAN