



JANUARY 2007

COUNTRY SUMMARY

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is one of the world's most repressive and closed countries. Authorities severely suppress all forms of dissent and isolate the population from the outside world. Saparmuad Niazov is president-for-life, with a pervasive personality cult. Under international pressure the government reduced harassment of some followers of minority religions, released several people from unwarranted detention in prison and psychiatric facilities, and allowed one dissident to travel abroad, but otherwise its human rights record in 2006 was disastrous.

Persecution of Human Rights Defenders and Independent Journalists

The majority of independent nongovernmental organizations are denied registration under politically motivated pretexts. To prevent uncensored information about Turkmenistan from reaching the outside world, the government continually seeks to silence journalists and rights defenders who work informally with foreign organizations. In March 2006 two Radio Liberty correspondents, Mered Khommadov and Jamadurdy Ovezov, were detained for 10 days on false charges of "hooliganism" and were released only after being forced to sign a statement promising not to work with the radio station. Also in March, Anna Kurbanova, a correspondent of the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS, was stripped of her accreditation reportedly in retaliation for critical reporting about pension reform.

Ogulsapar Muradova, a Radio Liberty correspondent, and Amandurdy Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khajiev, members of the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF), a Bulgaria-based rights organization, were arrested in Ashgabad in June. President Niazov publicly accused the three of "subversive activities" and "gathering slanderous information to spread public discontent." Security services also cited Amanklychev's participation in human rights trainings in Poland and Ukraine and his work with British and French journalists who visited Turkmenistan and reported on the human rights situation there. Elena Ovezova, another THF member, and Muradova's three adult children were also detained but released without charge 12 days later.

In August Muradova, Amanklychev, and Khajiev were sentenced in a closed trial to prison terms of six to seven years on false charges of “illegal weapons possession.” On September 14, Muradova’s children learned that she had died in Ministry of National Security custody. They saw her body and reported to relatives abroad that it bore signs of a violent death, though Turkmen officials declared that she died of “natural causes.” Security agents harassed and threatened Muradova’s children following her death. The fate and whereabouts of Amanklychev and Khajiev remain unknown.

On at least two occasions authorities in border areas seized Russian-language publications intended for sale in Turkmenistan and said that they could no longer be imported.

Abuse of Psychiatry

The government continued to abuse psychiatry to suppress dissent. For example, Kakabai Tejenov was subjected to nine months of forced psychiatric hospitalization in retaliation for sending a letter abroad about rights violations in Turkmenistan; he was released in October. Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev, who was incarcerated in a special psychiatric hospital in 2004 for calling for a political demonstration, was released on April 11, 2006, after 54 members of the US Congress signed a petition calling for his release.

Persecuting “Internal Enemies”

President Niazov continued Stalin-style purges of the government, identifying new “enemies” and corrupt bureaucrats among high-ranking officials. Former Prosecutor General Kurbanbibbi Atajanova, who played a leading role in prosecuting people for the November 2002 assassination attempt against Niazov, was arrested in April 2006. Editors of two government periodicals were also “purged”; one was sentenced in December 2005 to eight years’ imprisonment for hiring people related to “traitors.”

In July 2006 about 30 convicted high-ranking officials were transferred to a special prison in Ovadandepo created in 2003 for political prisoners. The fate of more than 60 people convicted on charges related to the 2002 assassination attempt remains unknown, but eight such individuals were amnestied in October, having “repented.”

Freedom of Movement

Thousands of people, including religious minorities and perceived dissidents and their relatives, are on “blacklists” banning them from leaving the country. In May 2006 security services agents removed Shageldy Atakov, a Baptist minister previously imprisoned for his religious work, from a scheduled flight to Moscow. Authorities have prevented Svetlana Orazova—whose brother heads an exiled political opposition movement in Sweden—and her family from leaving Turkmenistan, even though they have dual Russian-Turkmen citizenship.

The government allowed writer Rakhim Esenov to travel abroad in April to receive an award, after intervention by the US embassy and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). A criminal investigation against Esenov for publication of his novel remains open.

The government continues to use internal exile to punish “enemies.” In April Khajiniya Soiunova—whose husband is active in an exiled opposition movement—and her two daughters were forcibly expelled from Ashgabad to western Turkmenistan, where they had to find their own housing. The authorities confiscated their passports and ordered them not to leave the city of their internal exile without a special permit.

Religious Repression and Ethnic Discrimination

Several new religious groups and confessions were registered, but the state strictly limits religious freedom. The activities of unregistered religious organizations remain banned. Registered churches may lawfully hold services only in certain facilities, but many do not have such facilities and had problems renting them. On June 10, 2006, Alexander Frolov, a Russian citizen, was deported from Turkmenistan for conducting worship at home and attempting to import Christian literature. In December 2005 seven members of a registered Baptist church were detained in eastern Turkmenistan and intimidated by authorities for attempting to worship in a private home.

On November 17, 2005, Hare Krishna believer Cheper Annaniiazova was sentenced to seven years in prison for visiting Kazakhstan in 2003 without an exit visa, a harsh sentence likely intended to intimidate other Hare Krishna believers; she was released under amnesty in October 2006.

Ethnic minorities continue to face discrimination in admission to educational institutions and in the hiring process, and in some cases cannot study their mother tongues. Teachers who signed an appeal to President Niazov to re-establish education in Uzbek were questioned by police about “sowing public dissent” and some were subsequently laid off, though without explicit reference to the appeal. Following international criticism, in November 2005 the constitution was amended to allow non-ethnic Turkmen to run for president. Another amendment precludes citizens of other states from being recognized as Turkmen citizens, which may cause future problems for tens of thousands who had obtained dual Russian-Turkmen citizenship before this was banned in 2003. During his visit to Turkmenistan in March, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities raised with the country’s leadership the issues of minorities in education and the resettlement of minority communities in northern Turkmenistan.

Social and Economic Regression

Despite official declarations that Turkmenistan has entered a “golden era,” international organizations noted continuing degradation of public welfare. New pension legislation resulted in about 100,000 people losing their pensions in early 2006, which led to rising social tensions. During the first-ever review of Turkmenistan by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the government came under criticism for the reduction of compulsory education from 10 to nine years and for the fact that children attend school for an average of 30 days fewer than the international standard, due in part to child labor in cotton fields. The committee also expressed concern about the domination of the curriculum by the teachings of President Niazov’s book, *Ruhnama*.

Prison Conditions

Serious concerns remain about torture and ill-treatment in custody and about prison conditions. New rules introduced in January 2006 significantly decreased the number of inmates’ family visits and food packages. Poor conditions led to unrest in October in a women’s prison facility in Dashaguz. The habitual government response to severe prison overcrowding is blanket amnesties, and in October Niazov declared amnesty for about 10,000 of Turkmenistan’s 18,000 prison inmates. The government persisted in its refusal to grant international organizations access to prisons.

Key International Actors

An October report on Turkmenistan by the UN secretary-general concluded that “gross and systematic violations of human rights continued... notwithstanding gestures made by the Government.” The report noted the government’s failure to issue an invitation to UN thematic special mechanisms and repeated a recommendation that all 10 be invited to visit Turkmenistan. The Third Committee of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on Turkmenistan in December 2005 welcoming several government steps, but expressing “grave concern” about a number of human rights problems.

Citing human rights concerns, the European Parliament in October 2006 adopted a resolution to stop further consideration of an interim trade agreement with Turkmenistan.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development issued a new country strategy for Turkmenistan in September, in which it reaffirmed its suspension of any public sector investment due to the government’s “continued failure to take any measures which would indicate a willingness to make progress towards multi-party democracy, pluralistic society and a market-based economy.” The bank also reaffirmed private sector investment only if such investments were not effectively controlled by state entities and if government officials could not personally benefit from them.

The European Union and the United States co-sponsored the December 2005 UN General Assembly resolution on Turkmenistan. The US government successfully pressed the Turkmen government on several issues noted above, but in contrast to prior years it did not initiate a UN resolution in 2006; it also resisted using US policy tools for increased pressure for positive change. It has continued to grant Turkmenistan a waiver under the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denies certain trade benefits to countries that severely limit the right to emigrate. Despite the US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s recommendation, the US State Department again did not designate Turkmenistan a “country of particular concern” under the terms of the International Religious Freedom Act.