



The International Community Should Take Urgent Steps to End Enforced Disappearances in Turkmenistan

Statement by the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

August 30, 2017

Fifteen years ago the first major wave of enforced disappearances took place in Turkmenistan. In the spring and summer of 2002 several high-level government officials, mostly from the security and defense ministries, were sentenced to prison terms between 10 and 20 years. Their names are [Allamyrat Allakulyev](#), [Gurban Annadurdyev](#), [Gurbandurdy Begenjov](#), [Hayit Kakaev](#), [Seitbay Kandymov](#), [Kerimkuly Yeldashev](#), [Khudaykuly Khalykov](#), [Bayramkuly Khudaykulov](#), [Mukhamet Nazarov](#), [Batyr Sardzhaev](#), [Annamurat Soltanov](#), and [Tirkish Tyrmyev](#). It was not the first time that Turkmen officials were dismissed and arrested as a result of waves of repression that many suspected were politically motivated. What makes these arrests different is the fate of the prisoners: no one has had any contact with them since their imprisonment. In other words, they disappeared in prison.

Many more people have become victims of the crime of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons over the course of these 15 years, including most recently in 2016 and 2017. Reports by the Prove They Are Alive! campaign documented more than a hundred cases of people kept in full isolation in prison, some of them for as long as 15 years.

Enforced disappearance is a grave human rights violation, according to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment both for the disappeared and their families, thus falling also under the scope of the UN Convention against Torture. Turkmenistan has ratified both the Covenant and the Convention, and its constitutional framework stresses that domestic legislation must comply with international law. Turkmen criminal legislation does not permit full isolation of prisoners, regardless of the crime committed. Nevertheless, the authorities impose this cruel and illegal punishment on anyone they consider to be a political threat to their absolute power due to their opinions, influence, or visibility.

The fate of [Mukhamet Nazarov](#) and [Tirkish Tyrmyev](#) clearly demonstrate the ruthlessness of the Turkmen authorities in dealing with such "threats": the court documents related to Mukhamet Nazarov, a former Head of the Committee of National Security, are not available and even the length

of his sentence is not clear. Turkish Tyrmyev's prison term should have ended in March 2012: instead, a few days before his expected release, his family was informed of an additional 7-year term for alleged violations of prison rules, about which no details were provided and no documentation is available. [He died in January 2017, two years before the end of this second prison term.](#)

Most of the disappeared were arrested following a wave of repressions that shook the country in the early 2000s. The largest group of disappeared was accused of an assassination attempt on then President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov on November 25, 2002. More than 60 people were convicted then on charges of direct involvement in the alleged coup attempt. Some of them have died in prison while the fate of many others remains unknown. This massive wave of arrests prompted the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to launch its Moscow Mechanism, which allows OSCE participating states to investigate and address serious human rights problems taking place in any OSCE state. An OSCE Special Rapporteur for Turkmenistan [described in detail](#) the extensive human rights violations that were perpetrated during the arrest, trial, and subsequent imprisonment of those involved in the alleged coup attempt. Among these violations, the report noted incommunicado detentions. The situation was in the focus of attention of two UN General Assembly resolutions in 2003 and 2004. In 2006, the situation of the disappeared was again referred to in the [UN Secretary General's Report on Human Rights in Turkmenistan](#).

Since the Prove They Are Alive! campaign was launched in 2013, international organizations and many governments have consistently demanded that Turkmenistan cease this practice. The UN Committee on Human Rights and the UN Committee against Torture recently stressed enforced disappearances as a grave and persistent violation by Turkmenistan of the UN Convention Against Torture and of the ICCPR in their Concluding Observations on Turkmenistan of [November 2016](#) and [March 2017](#). The European Union regularly tries to find a solution through its annual Human Rights Dialogue with Turkmenistan; in 2015 and 2016, the European Parliament twice [suspended its approval of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Turkmenistan](#) on human rights grounds, including enforced disappearances. In October 2014, the UN Human Rights Committee [issued a decision](#) on the case of [Boris Shikhmuradov](#), former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, acknowledging him as a victim of enforced disappearance and numerous other human rights violations. The Committee ruled that Turkmenistan is under obligation to disclose information about where he is detained, provide him and his family with an effective remedy, and prevent similar violations in the future. After almost three years, [Turkmenistan has not reacted](#) to this decision.

In spite of sustained pressure from the international community, the Turkmen authorities have failed to disclose information about the disappeared to their families, Turkmen society, and the international community, have not implemented relevant decisions by inter-governmental bodies, and have avoided taking any significant steps to end this gross violation of human rights, instead simulating an ineffective "dialogue" with international organizations on this issue.

Recent death in custody of yet another victim of enforced disappearances is a stark reminder of the urgency of the situation: The former Head of the Security Service of the President of Turkmenistan, Akmurad Redjepov, died in prison on August 10, 2017, after 10 years of having been held in custody without any contact with the outside world. Altogether, at least five people from the Prove They Are Alive! list of the disappeared died in prison between December 2015 and August 2017, according to media reports and information from relatives.

In September 2015, the Turkmen authorities stopped short of publicly acknowledging enforced disappearances in their country by acknowledging, for the first time, the existence of a problem concerning “people sentenced to long prison terms” in their statements at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw.¹ At the following HDIM in September 2016, the Turkmen representative claimed that the authorities had released some of the people from the Prove They Are Alive! list and had informed international organisations about a few others.² However, this information has not been made public and cannot be verified by independent observers such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has no access to the country’s prisons. Authorities also returned the bodies of some of the disappeared who died in prison in 2015-2017. These very small steps, although better than the total silence that surrounded the disappeared for a decade, are still very far from anything resembling a real solution.

In fact, the solution to enforced disappearance is not returning dead bodies after many years of full isolation, or exchanging some limited information with international organizations behind closed doors. The solution is to ensure immediate access to prisoners by their relatives, lawyers, and independent monitors such as the ICRC. The solution is immediate contact of the forcibly disappeared persons with the outside world. The solution is to prove that they are alive.

Continued enforced disappearances in Turkmen prisons, both from the early 2000s and the very recent ones in 2016-2017, documented by the Prove They are Alive! campaign, are a serious challenge to the international community. We believe that only public and principled statements and actions by the leaders of democratic countries and international organizations, including strong linkage of economic cooperation with real human rights progress in Turkmenistan will stop this orgy of death. We call on the leaders of democratic countries and international organizations to respond in a most serious way to the deteriorating human rights situation in Turkmenistan. It is high time for the international community to take urgent steps now with regard to victims of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan’s prisons. Otherwise, all of the disappeared can expect a tragic fate.

The international human rights Prove They Are Alive! campaign has been working since 2013 to protect the rights of detainees serving long-term sentences in Turkmen prisons who, since their sentences, have been held incommunicado, and to halt the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan’s prisons. The campaign acts with the support of the international Civic Solidarity Platform and actively interacts with a broad range of human rights defenders, experts, and inter-governmental organisations, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union.

¹ See official video recordings of the sessions at HDIM-2015 with statements by the head of the Turkmenistan delegation:

<https://youtu.be/a1Vv2r34SN8>, <https://youtu.be/pf1p5vLh77s>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IO3anXFjAok>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RaB8DtXMnY>.

² See official video recordings of the sessions at HDIM-2016 with statements by the head of the Turkmenistan delegation:

<https://youtu.be/D4iXzeLuvLk>, <https://youtu.be/gnY7WqIXIIM> and <https://youtu.be/LI6lQ-kmW6g>