



The State of Political Prisoners in Turkmenistan Demands Immediate Action by the International Community

The Prove They Are Alive! Campaign's Statement on Turkish Tyrmyev's Death in Prison

January 16, 2017

The international campaign, Prove They Are Alive!, expresses its deep concern about the death in prison of the former head of the State Border Service of Turkmenistan, Major General Turkish Tyrmyev, a victim of the political purges during the presidency of Niyazov when he was imprisoned. On January 13, the Turkmen authorities returned the body of 66 year old Tyrmyev to his family in Ashgabat after he died in captivity. Turkish Tyrmyev was one of the first victims of forced disappearance among high level state officials in Turkmenistan and was imprisoned for almost 15 years without any contact with the outside world. The last time his family saw him was during his trial on May 7, 2002.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign expresses its sincere condolences to the family and friends of Turkish Tyrmyev. This tragedy has caused enormous anguish for the family, who waited and hoped all these long years that he would return home.

Turkish Tyrmyev was not connected with the opposition. It is believed that he became a victim of persecution because he could have known about details of the supply of narcotics from Afghanistan, which was organized with the participation of people close to the first president of the country, Saparmurad Niyazov, and that he tried to fight against narco-trafficking in his post as the commander of the border patrol. Furthermore, Niyazov reportedly demanded from Tyrmyev compromising information about other leaders of law enforcement agencies, whom the extremely suspicious dictator planned to eliminate during regular purges of the state apparatus. We have reason to believe that Tyrmyev's refusal to inform on his colleagues was one of the reasons for his arrest.

Tyrmyev was considered to be an honest person and a patriot of his country. He had great authority among the officers of the border patrol, as well as in the army and security services. Almost the entire officer corps of that generation, who began their service during the Soviet period, subsequently perished, disappeared in prison, were kicked out, or were forced to leave their country as a result of several waves of repression from 2002 to 2006 during the Niyazov regime and in 2007, under the new president Berdymukhamedov.

Tyrmyev was arrested in April and convicted on May 7, 2002 to ten years for “abuse of power.” Ten years later, in March 2012, several days before the end of his term, when the family was already awaiting his return, he was convicted in a closed prison court to a second term of seven years and 11 months for allegedly “fighting with a prison guard.” Tyrmyev’s second term should have ended in 2019, but he did not live to be released. Essentially, a person who survived many years of torture and complete isolation, was pushed to death by the Turkmen authorities not long before his release.

The danger exists that in connection with the presidential elections in Turkmenistan in February of this year, during which President Berdymukhamedov will be “elected” for a third term, the Turkmen authorities plan to deal with those survivors of repression who are isolated in prison and might know something about the crimes of the Niyazov regime and/or the circumstances of Berdymukhamedov’s coming to power. Local observers state that by doing this Berdymukhamedov may want to begin his new presidential term with “a clean slate,” rather than releasing all the past victims of illegal persecution. The death of Tyrmyev, the conditions of which are unknown, could be a strong signal to law enforcement officers that the current government does not recognize any authority and that only complete submission and loyalty can serve as a security guarantee for each one of them.

According to nongovernmental organizations, over one hundred people have disappeared into the prison system in Turkmenistan over the past 15 years. The authorities perceived them to be a threat and placed them in complete isolation in violation of international standards and national law. Some of those people have already died. The Prove They Are Alive! Campaign has, at present, documented 88 cases of disappearances and continues to collect data on additional cases.¹ In the past 13 months, the death of Tyrmyev is, at a minimum, the fourth death of a prisoner who had been in long-term isolation in a secret prison. We are convinced that the continuation of the practice of enforced disappearances in the prisons of Turkmenistan is a serious barrier to the path of development for the country and is used by the authorities to intimidate the public and prevent any sentiment for reform within the state apparatus. As long as this repressive practice exists and there is a threat of new disappearances in prisons, no transformation is possible in Turkmenistan.

Tyrmyev’s death is a challenge to the international community. The authorities in the country are demonstrating that Turkmenistan intends to continue to ignore its international obligations within the frameworks of the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is no less egregious that this tragic occurrence happened within the context of personal obligations, given in 2015-2016 by Berdymukhamedov to US Secretary of State John Kerry and to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, about establishment of joint expert groups on the issue of disappearances in Turkmen prisons and the organization of visits to prisons by diplomats. It is becoming clear that the authorities of Turkmenistan are sabotaging these promises and lying to the international community. They are making defiant gestures, demonstrating their intention to flout their international obligations. For example, they ignored all questions about the disappeared in prisons raised in the course of the recent dialogue with the UN Committee Against Torture, they have not implemented the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee for two years, and, in response to a request from the European Commission, provided data on only seven prisoners from the list of 88 disappeared.

We are confident that Tyrmyev’s death in prison is also the result of a weak-willed, conformist, and unprincipled position among some western diplomats and bureaucrats, including from the institutions of the European Union, individual EU countries, and the United States. For them, political and economic

¹ “Prove They Are Alive! The Disappeared in Turkmenistan”, a report by the Prove They Are Alive! campaign, August 2016. <http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Disappeared-Report-2016.pdf>

interests have taken priority over fundamental human rights. The inaction of many diplomats and bureaucrats and their cynical relationship to the victims of the authoritarian Turkmen regime discredit the human rights rhetoric of western governments. The lack of a principled human rights position on Turkmenistan by western embassies and representatives of the UN and the OSCE is a phenomenon of the same problem. They do not want to irritate the dictatorial regime with “uncomfortable” questions, which satisfies a regime that simulates an ineffective “dialogue” with international institutions on human rights issues. Thus, the responsibility for the death of political prisoners in Turkmenistan also lies with western countries.

We are sure that only public and principled statements from the leaders of democratic countries and international organizations and linking 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 serious way to the deteriorating human rights situation in Turkmenistan, including in the context of the upcoming pseudo-elections for president of Turkmenistan on February 12, 2017. It is necessary to take urgent steps with regard to political prisoners who have been in isolation for many years in Turkmenistan’s prisons. Otherwise, all of them can expect a tragic fate.