**15 years of SECRECY AND DESPAIR: urgent INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS**

**ARE NEEDED TO END disappearANCES in Turkmen prisons**

***Appeal of the Turkmen public to participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in connection with the 15th anniversary of***

***the OSCE Moscow Mechanism report on Turkmenistan***

February 20, 2018

Fifteen years ago, ten participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europeinvoked the OSCE Moscow Mechanism regarding Turkmenistan. It was the international community's landmark response to the large-scale repression launched by the country's authorities against hundreds of people suspected of involvement in what the Turkmen government described as an “assassination attempt on President Niyazov.”

Under brutal torture, people were forced to confess to many crimes they did not commit. As a result, in early 2003, more than 60 suspects were found guilty and sentenced to long prison terms, and seven were sentenced to life imprisonment. Following rushed and unfair trials behind closed doors, no one has seen these people again. The authorities labeled them "terrorists" and locked them up forever behind bars. Throughout all these years, their families have received no information as to their relatives’ whereabouts and whether they are still alive. The families are suffering from this uncertainty. Hundreds, even thousands, of prisoners’ relatives and friends fell victim to persecution by the authorities: many were arbitrarily fired from their jobs, expelled from universities, lost their homes and property, were exiled to remote areas of the country and banned from leaving Turkmenistan. This massive human rights abuse, often involving blatant violations of Turkmenistan's domestic law, has been documented in detail in a report prepared by Professor Emmanuel Decaux, following the research he was appointed to do under the OSCE Moscow Mechanism.

Although the Turkmen authorities refused to cooperate with the OSCE rapporteur in 2003, Decaux’s detailed and highly professional report helped draw the world's attention to the large-scale repression in Turkmenistan and informed further response by the international community, including three resolutions of the UN General Assembly and two reports of the UN Secretary General. These UN documents expressed grave concern over the dire human rights situation in Turkmenistan and urged the country's authorities to stop the violations and conduct an impartial investigation.

Invoking the OSCE Moscow Mechanism and the international response that followed helped reduce the scale of repression but could not save those who were already missing in Turkmen prisons. Driven by paranoid fears, President Niyazov continued, until his death in 2006, his repeated “purges” of the state apparatus, comparable only to Stalin's repression. Many civil servants were charged and convicted as “saboteurs,” “spies” or “embezzlers of public funds.” Those convicted disappeared incommunicado in Turkmen prisons. The lack of information about the fate of their loved ones has caused tremendous suffering to families having no information for 10 to 15 years as to whether their relatives are still alive. A state party to the OSCE and the UN, Turkmenistan under Niyazov was a present-day reincarnation of medieval despotism, plunged into self-isolation. It earned the international reputation of a hopeless "second North Korea."

President Berdymukhammedov's coming to power in 2006 brought hope for positive change. Turkmen society looked forward to at least some positive developments, in particular for an end to the nightmarish repression of the Niyazov era. At first, President Berdymukhammedov acquired the reputation of a reformer by allowing a certain thaw in the early years of his presidency. Disappearances in prisons almost stopped for a while. Soon, however, the thaw ended, a cult of personality returned, and political repression resumed with renewed vigor. An impartial review of more than a decade of the new presidency reveals no substantial change for the better in state and society. Moreover, in recent years, people began to disappear again after secret trials, closed to families and society, and incommunicado detention in Turkmen prisons. The pervasive fear of being arbitrarily arrested at any moment and then disappearing forever has had a profoundly negative impact on all parts of Turkmen society, paralyzing all initiative and public discussion. This fear deprives us of any hope for change.

To this day, nothing is known about the fate of nearly a hundred people who disappeared in Niyazov's time. The sentences of some of them were supposed to end soon, and the families were looking forward to seeing their loved ones again. Then came the shocking news that some of the prisoners had been convicted to new, long prison terms; the second shock was when some families received the bodies of relatives whom they had expected to see alive. In many cases, learning about their new prison term or death was the first and last piece of news about the person in 15 years.

Tirkish Tyrmyev, Yolly Gurbanmuradov, Akmurad Rejepov and others whose bodies, bearing signs of exhaustion and torture, were handed over to the relatives over the past two years. Thus they were “released” after their death shortly before their sentences would have ended. These events came as a shock to society, particularly since many people who died in custody had previously held top government positions and enjoyed popular respect. However, the Turkmen authorities have made it very clear that they respect no one. Families have been threatened into silence about their relatives' deaths in prison.

In 2013, the Prove They Are Alive! international campaign was launched to address the problem of forced disappearances in Turkmenistan. To date, the campaign has documented 112 cases, but the actual number of disappearances is known to be higher, and the tragic list is not yet closed. Sadly, the Turkmen authorities have defied the campaign's appeals. Likewise, President Berdymukhammedov has failed to respond to direct inquiries about the missing people from OSCE Chairman and Swiss President Didier Burkhalter, US Secretary of State John Kerry and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Instead, President Berdymukhammedov has been making noncommittal remarks and promises to “sort everything out” or “hand over the cases to experts.” Turkmen diplomats, in response to direct questions, vaguely refer to negotiations with “foreign partners” which for some reason must be kept secret from the international community and, more importantly, from Turkmen society and from prisoners' relatives and friends.

Recently, we have learned that the Prove They Are Alive! campaign has been trying to convince the OSCE participating states of the need for a new urgent joint action to address the still unresolved issue of disappearances in Turkmen prisons. We, relatives of the missing people, authorized representatives of the relatives, and members of Turkmenistan's civil society fully support this initiative. We are convinced that prompt and decisive action by the OSCE and other international organizations is urgently needed.

We call on you to understand the depth of the tragedy affecting a large number of people and families in our country. For fifteen years, we have lived under the unending torture of uncertainty. The only thing we are seeking now is information about the fate of our loved ones and an opportunity to see them.

We appeal to you as representatives of OSCE participating states to make every effort to engage Turkmenistan in a dialogue in the framework of the OSCE emergency mechanisms. Every effort needs to be made to get the government to finally take meaningful steps towards a solution. We are confident that a dialogue in the framework of the OSCE emergency mechanisms will push the authorities towards finding a civilized solution to the terrible tragedy affecting Turkmenistan's entire society and will help turn this tragic page in the country's history.

Turkmenistan's officials need to understand that forced disappearances in prisons, even under the pretext of legality, are a continuing crime under international law and cannot be justified by any goal. They must realize that this is how the international community views the disappearances, and no amount of smokescreens such as endless and meaningless negotiations and “Potemkin villages” of exemplary prisons can change this attitude.

We are confident that unless the OSCE emergency mechanisms are invoked, our country's authorities will continue to delay the process and attempt to deceive both the international community and the Turkmen people. It is essential to get Turkmenistan's authorities to realize the vital importance of a meaningful dialogue with society. They must finally inform the relatives of all missing people whether their loved ones are still alive, and stop this terrible torture by uncertainty.

Some of us have already received the bodies of our relatives who died in prison and some others still hope to see their loved ones alive and free. We urge you to help us solve this problem without further delay. Fifteen years is a very long time. Time is running out, and the affected families’ chances of seeing their relatives alive or learning about their fate are diminishing with each passing day.

The anniversary of the report on the situation in our country published pursuant to the OSCE Moscow Mechanism reminds us of this important act of international solidarity and gives us hope. Fifteen years ago, concerned OSCE participating states responded to our tragedy and helped Turkmen society. Now, the time has come when we urgently need your help once again. We hope for your assistance and look forward to it.

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*The appeal was written and signed by more than 30 citizens of Turkmenistan – relatives and friends of victims of enforced disappearances in Turkmen prisons, and civil society activists. Since they all live in Turkmenistan, their names are not published for security reasons.*

We, as representatives of international civil society organizations, support this appeal:

* Yuri Dzhibladze, Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
* Olga Zakharova, Freedom Files Analytical Centre (Russia/Poland)
* Kate Watters, Crude Accountability (USA)
* Vitaly Ponomarev, Memorial Human Rights Centre (Russia)
* Rachel Denber, Human Rights Watch (international)
* Ivar Dale, Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)
* Oleksandra Matviychuk, Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
* Anara Ibrayeva, Public Association “Dignity” (Kazakhstan)
* Tolekan Ismailova, Bir Duino – Kyrgyzstan
* Nina Karapetyants, Helsinki Association for Human Rights (Armenia)
* Avetik Ishkhanyan, Helsinki Committee of Armenia
* Elena Shakhova, Citizens’ Watch (Russia)
* Artur Sakunts, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)
* Stefan Melle, Deutsch-Russischer Austausch – German-Russian Exchange (Germany)
* Haykuhi Harutyunyan, Protection of Rights without Borders (Armenia)
* Cornelia Koller, Austrian Helsinki Association (Austria)
* Natalia Taubina, Public Verdict Foundation (Russia)
* Vadym Pyvovarov, Association UMDPL (Ukraine)
* Tatsiana Reviaka, The Barys Zvozskau Belarusian Human Rights House (Lithuania/Belarus)
* Ales Bialiatski, Human Rights Center "Viasna" (Belarus)
* Katie Morris, Article 19 (United Kingdom)
* Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law
* Leila Alieva, Regional Center for Strategic Studies (Georgia/Azerbaijan)
* Andrea Menapace, Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti civili – Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD) (Italy)
* Tetiana Pechonchyk, Human Rights Information Centre (Ukraine)
* Danuta Przywara, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
* Márta Pardavi, Hungarian Helsinki Committee (Hungary)
* Elena Tonkacheva, Legal Transformation Centre (Belarus)
* Uranija Pirovska, Macedonian Helsinki Committee (Macedonia)
* Krassimir Kanev, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria)
* Alban Muriqi, Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims (Kosovo)
* Eldar Zeynalov, Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan
* Tatiana Shikhmuradova, wife of a political prisoner who disappeared in prison in Turkmenistan (Russia)
* Brigitte Dufour, International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
* Vyacheslav Mamedov, Democratic Civil Union of Turkmenistan (Netherlands)
* Svitlana Valko, Truth Hounds (Georgia/Ukraine)
* Mariya Yasenovska, Kharkiv Regional Foundation “Public Alternative” (Ukraine)
* Ann Maralyan**,** Centre de la Protection Internationale (France)
* Svetlana Astrakhantseva, Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia)
* Farid Tukhbatullin, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (Austria)
* Erika Leonaitė, Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)
* Aleh Hulak, Belarusian Helsinki Committee (Belarus)
* Pepijn Gerrits, Netherlands Helsinki Committee (Netherlands)
* Geldy Kyarizov, former prisoner of the Ovadan-Depe prison (Czech Republic)
* Yulia Serebryannik, “Rights and Freedoms of Citizens of Turkmenistan” (Czech Republic)
* Diana Serebryannik, “Turkmen Yurt TV” (Czech Republic)
* Valentina Cherevatenko, “Women of the Don” Union (Russia)
* Matthias Hui, humanrights.ch (Switzerland)
* Izabela Kisic, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (Serbia)
* Timur Misrikhanov, Turkmenistan  Independent Lawyers Association (Netherlands)
* Giorgi Marjanishvili, Center for Participation and Development (Georgia)
* Alexandra Delemenchuk, Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (Ukraine)
* Daria Atdaeva, wife of a political prisoner who disappeared in prison in Turkmenistan (Egypt)
* Alex Postica, Promo-LEX Association (Moldova)