



**International
Partnership**
for Human Rights

Turkmenistan: UN body to take stock of the state of child rights

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With the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child set to begin its review of Turkmenistan today, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) sound alarm about persistent violations of the rights of children and young people in this authoritarian, repressive and closed Central Asian country.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, an expert body that monitors implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, first reviewed Turkmenistan in 2006. Meeting in Geneva, the Committee will now take stock of the progress made by the Turkmen government in the years since then.

A report submitted for the review by TIHR, a Vienna-based exiled group that works closely together with activists inside Turkmenistan, details violations of the rights of children and young people in the areas of freedom of expression and access to information; education, leisure and cultural activities; as well as basic health and welfare. The report shows that the situation in these areas remains of serious concern and that the authorities have failed to bring about any substantial improvements in spite of reform promises made by current President Berdymuhammedov when taking power in 2007.

The Turkmen authorities continue to impose wide-ranging restrictions on all forms of mass media with the aim of preventing citizens, including children from obtaining information that is not controlled by the state. While internet penetration has slowly been increasing in recent years, the authorities have cracked down on “suspicious” online content by blocking access to foreign sites that report independently about the situation in the country, social networking sites, as well as online forums and messaging applications that are popular among young people.

No systematic reforms have been implemented to reverse the degradation of the country’s education system that took place during the previous president and this system is still characterized by a strong ideological orientation. Teaching of the infamous *Rukhnama* authored by the previous president has now been replaced with classes in writings of the current president, while students continue to be mobilized en masse for frequent holiday parades and other spectacles aimed at demonstrating the well-being and “glory” of the nation.

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Broad layers of the population have benefited little from Turkmenistan's natural resource wealth and many children especially in rural regions still grow up in poor living conditions, e.g. without access to safe drinking water. Families whose homes have been demolished to make way for grandiose government construction projects have often not received adequate compensation – if any at all, and support pledged to large families has largely remained declaratory in nature.

While a number of new high-end medical facilities have been constructed in recent years, the health care sector continues to be plagued by basic problems such as misallocation of resources, corrupt practices and lack of qualified staff, supplies and medicines, all of which endanger the health of both adults and children. The authorities continue to deny and conceal information on health matters, such as the outbreak of infectious diseases, and have increasingly resorted to questionable tactics in the name of enforcing moral standards and promoting healthy lifestyles among young people.

(For more details, see summary below).

TIHR and IPHR encourage the Committee on the Rights of the Child to give close attention to the issues highlighted in TIHR's report and to request the Turkmen government to account in detail for its policies in these areas (including by providing accurate figures), as well as its lack of progress on recommendations made by the Committee eight years ago.

At the end of its current session, the Committee will adopt a list of questions that the Turkmen authorities will be asked to respond to ahead of the final stage of the review, which is scheduled to take place in January 2015 and will involve a face-to-face dialogue with Turkmen government officials. As part of a project implemented jointly with Brussels-based IPHR and Central Asian partners, TIHR Director Farid Tuhbatullin will be present in Geneva today to brief Committee members on issues and recommendations covered in TIHR's report, as well as to provide additional information.

Summary of major issues

Below follows a summary of major issues covered in TIHR's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as related developments that have taken place since the report was submitted in February 2014. The full text of TIHR's report is available at: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/wp-content/uploads/Turkmen-Initiative-for-Human-Rights-Alternative-Report-on-Turkmenistan-Committee-on-the-Rights-of-the-Child-February-2014.pdf>

The right of the child to freedom of expression and access to information

- The Turkmen authorities continue to seriously restrict freedom of expression and free flow of information, thus impeding the rights of children to seek, receive and impart information and to have access to information from a diversity of national and international sources.

- Both print and broadcast media in the country continue to be tightly controlled and used as means of ideological propaganda, although a new media law that entered into force in 2013 explicitly banned censorship and guaranteed the right to free access to information. There are no independent media in the country.
- While internet penetration has been slowly increasing in recent years, it remains low (about 7% according to available statistics) because of prohibitive costs and a lack of systematic efforts to promote internet access. At the same time, internet censorship remains prevalent. Independent, foreign-based sites reporting about the situation in the country (such as TIHR's site), social networking sites, and online messaging applications and forums popular among young people are among the web resources that have been blocked in the country. Email correspondence is known to have been monitored.
- A number of internet cafes have been opened since the current president took power, but they provide an inhibitive environment for visitors, whose internet use is recorded. In most schools, there is no internet access.
- TV is a major propaganda tool of the Turkmen authorities and programs broadcast on national channels are closely screened. While foreign TV channels are accessible via private satellite dishes, the authorities have made attempts to restrict access also to this source of information through initiatives to dismantle satellite dishes because they allegedly spoil the skyline.
- Those who express criticism of the regime, including individuals in exile and their family members in Turkmenistan are subject to persecution. In a [recent example](#), the brother of TIHR's head was prevented from leaving Turkmenistan in April this year and told that he and his 9-year-old son are on a list of people banned from travelling abroad.
- The Turkmen authorities heavily promote patriotic music and have sought to discourage the spread of other music popular among young people such as rap and hip hop, e.g. by restricting access to recording studios for non-state approved artists and blocking access to websites where such music is shared.

The right of the child to education, rest and leisure, and free participation in cultural life

- During the years in power of former President Niyazov, the country's education system deteriorated badly. Since his death in 2006, some education reforms have been initiated, and in 2013 the length of compulsory education was increased to 12 years. However, the reform process has been lacking a clear overall strategy, new curricula have been developed in a hasty and inconsistent manner, and the transition to 12 years of schooling was implemented at short notice without relevant preparations. Overall there have been no substantial improvements in the quality of education.
- Many teachers who have obtained their degrees in the past two decades are not sufficiently competent and there is an acute lack of textbooks for many subjects, resulting among others in that teachers continue to use old Soviet-era books. Outside of the capital Ashgabat (where some new schools are clad in marble), schools and kindergartens are often in a bad shape and lack basic equipment. While the current president has launched several high-profile initiatives to provide schools with computers, teachers often do not make use of such equipment because of lack of IT knowledge and out of fear of being held responsible in case students break computers.

- Education continues to be characterized by a strong ideological orientation. Study of the *Rukhnama* authored by former President Niazov was abolished in 2013, although this work remains part of the required readings in literary classes and university entrance exams. However, as of the beginning of 2014, mandatory classes in books written by the current president or devoted to him were introduced instead.
- School children and university students are regularly forced to participate in various sports events, as well as mass parades and other events organized by the authorities on the occasion of national holidays and high-level political visits. Because of lengthy and time-consuming rehearsals for such events students miss classes and spare time and their health is put at risk. In November 2012, two students died after contracting pneumonia during rehearsals for Neutrality Day celebrations held in freezing temperatures.
- Corruption is widespread in the education system. Teachers pay bribes to secure employment, while parents pay bribes to ensure the admission of their children to kindergartens and schools, as well as good grades. Parents and teachers are also often required to pay for various school supplies and even repairs of school buildings.
- Due to the limited number of spots at the country's universities, corruption is particularly rampant at this level. According to TIHR's sources, a bribe required to ensure admission to university may amount to 15.000 EUR or more, depending on how prestigious the institution is. The government is now reportedly [considering](#) introducing tuition fees at universities, but it remains unclear whether this will help combat corruption.
- While a growing number of Turkmen students have enrolled at universities abroad in recent years, this category of students has come under pressure by the authorities. In a number of cases, such students have been prevented from leaving Turkmenistan and/or summoned and questioned about their relation to political events in their countries of study. A decree signed by the president in January 2014 introduced [new rules](#) regarding the certification of foreign diplomas in Turkmenistan, thus creating additional obstacles to have degrees obtained abroad recognized back home.
- Many members of ethnic minorities are deprived of the opportunity to study in their own language due to the closure of schools and the reduction of instruction in such languages in the last decade. A dress code requiring students to wear the Turkmen national costume continues to be enforced in schools.
- In the recent period, Turkmen authorities have stepped up efforts to enforce "moral standards" among citizens, especially among young people, giving rise to concerns about growing repression under this pretext. Among others, [in a number of cases](#) reported by TIHR, young couples have been warned by police not to not hold hands or hug in public under the threat that they may otherwise be detained, expelled from university etc.

The right of the child to an adequate standard of living

- In spite of Turkmenistan's natural resource wealth and growing GDP, many people in the country continue to live in poverty. Increasing living costs, widespread unemployment and salaries that are not being paid out on time are part of the problem. While the official monthly minimum wage is 440 manats (around 115 EUR) as of the beginning of 2014, TIHR has [shown](#)

that the costs for an average consumer basket for a family with two adults and two children may exceed 1000 manats (over 250 EUR).

- Lack of access to safe drinking water remains a serious problem in many parts of the country, with adverse consequences for the well-being of families and children. The use of water from contaminated sources such as irrigation channels contribute to the spread of diseases, e.g. diarrhea and dysentery.
- Families residing in buildings that have been demolished to make room for government construction projects such as highways, stadiums, hotels and luxurious apartment buildings have often not been adequately compensated. For example, they been granted alternative accommodation that is not comparable in size to the one they have been forced to leave, they have been promised to receive alternative accommodation only in a few years time, or they have not been compensated at all. Currently over 300 families whose houses have been demolished [live in barracks](#) in deplorable conditions at the outskirts of the capital Ashgabat.
- As part of an effort to revitalize the tradition of large families, the Turkmen authorities introduced the honorary title *Ene mähri* (“Mother’s love”) for mothers with eight or more children in 2008. These women and their families are entitled to certain benefits, such as free public transport. However, the authorities have largely failed to deliver on promises to ensure improved housing conditions for them. While 17 women granted the honorary title had been promised to receive new apartments in Ashgabat in connection with this year’s International Women’s Day, [only five of them](#) actually did so.
- In another case reported by TIHR, a mother of eight in the city of Mary and her family are currently [threatened by eviction](#) from the two-room apartment where they live, in spite of numerous appeals to authorities. Up to now the family has not been offered any alternative accommodation, although the mother was granted the honorary title *Ene mähri* this year after TIHR publicized the case.
- Government repression and a lack of perspective are believed to be among the reasons for an increasing number of suicides reported among young people. There are, however, no reliable overall statistics of the number of suicides, e.g. because police underreport them out of fear for repercussions for not keeping the situation “under control.”

The right of the child to health

- Turkmenistan’s health care sector deteriorated to an appalling state during previous President Niyazov. When taking power, his successor promised reforms. However, while a number of new high-end medical facilities have been constructed in recent years, the health care system continues to be plagued by basic problems such as misallocation of resources, corrupt practices and lack of qualified staff, supplies and medicines, all of which endanger the health of both adults and children.
- Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has [described](#) the country’s health care system as one characterized by systematic denial of serious health issues, manipulation of health statistics, as well as a culture of fear among healthcare staff who are under pressure to uphold the positive image that the authorities want to create. MSF left Turkmenistan in late 2009 due to the restrictions it faced in carrying out its work.

- The authorities continue efforts to deny and cover up information about the outbreak of infectious diseases, as a result of which appropriate measures are not taken to prevent the further spread of such diseases and patients are denied treatment they would need. TIHR has, for example, [reported](#) about the failure of the authorities to inform about and prevent the spread of infectious diseases in child day care centres.
- Even if treatment at public medical institutions is formally free, patients are often required to pay various fees and acquire basic supplies at their own cost. For example, as [reported](#) by TIHR, at rural maternity wards, women are expected to bring a whole list of supplies ranging from bandages and antiseptics to light bulbs and fans, in addition to paying both official and unofficial fees for the assistance they receive.
- Because of a lack of systematic awareness-raising, as well as restrictions on access to information, young people are often poorly informed about health issues such as safe sex practices, HIV/AIDS, and the risks of drug use. At the same time, questionable tactics have been used to promote government priorities in these areas. As reported by TIHR, in Ashgabat schools, senior grade girls have been subjected to [humiliating medical checks](#) in an initiative to combat “immoral” sexual practices (understood as pre-marital sex), and a [mass drive](#) has been carried out to have students undergo blood tests as part of a campaign against drug use.