UN review to spotlight Turkmenistan’s dire human rights record

Vienna, Brussels, New York 14 March 2012. The upcoming review of Turkmenistan by a key United Nations human rights body is expected to spotlight the dire human rights record of this country, as well as the lack of any meaningful human rights progress under its current president. A 15-page contribution to the review by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) details major human rights concerns in the Central Asian country.

The UN Human Rights Committee, an independent expert body that monitors compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), will review Turkmenistan at its current session in New York on 15-16 March 2012. It’s the first time that Turkmenistan will be reviewed under the ICCPR since acceding to the treaty in 1997. The Turkmen government submitted its initial report about measures taken to give effect to the rights recognized in the ICCPR more than ten years after it was due.

When President Berdymukhammedov came to power in Turkmenistan in 2007, there were great hopes that this would result in positive human rights change. However, the situation has remained essentially unchanged. The president continues to enjoy virtually unlimited powers and fundamental rights and freedoms continue to be restricted in all walks of life. The TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee draws attention to the following issues:

- Pro-forma presidential and parliamentary elections held in the country have not offered voters any real choice, with all candidates being loyal to the current regime. The parliament remains subservient to the president. All known political opponents are either in exile abroad or in prison, and a purported outreach to exile opponents prior to the February 2012 presidential elections proved to be an empty gesture.

- The Turkmen authorities tightly control the country’s state-run media and use them as outlets for ideological propaganda. Internet use remains heavily regulated and access to “sensitive” online information is blocked. The only competitor to the state-owned mobile company was forced out of the country in late 2010 and private satellite dishes have recently come under renewed attack.

- The few local journalists who contribute to independent foreign media, such as the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, as well as members of civil society who speak up about problems existing in the country face intimidation and harassment by security services. Their relatives and friends are also the targets of repression.

- The authorities continue to promote government-controlled organizations instead of independent civil society groups, while international human rights NGOs are not allowed to work in the country. The acute risk of reprisal effectively discourages public protests against
government policies, with the only known recent attempt at a protest having been quashed by police.

- The only existing political party is the pro-presidential Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. A first-ever Law on Political Parties adopted in January this year establishes broad grounds for denying registration and, in the current repressive political climate, it is unlikely to result in the emergence of any real competitor to the ruling party.

- Torture and ill-treatment remain widespread, with individuals held in pre-trial detention being particularly vulnerable to such treatment. Courts ignore torture allegations made by defendants and hand down convictions on the basis of statements made under duress. Independent observers have been denied access to the country’s prisons and detention facilities.

- Bans on travelling abroad are used as a means to punish and put pressure on individuals who are considered “disloyal” to the regime, as well as their family members. Turkmen students enrolled at schools abroad have been barred from leaving the country on repeated occasions, while individuals with dual Turkmen-Russian passports have been put under pressure to give up their Russian citizenship.

The TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee also makes recommendations for steps that the Turkmen authorities should be asked to take to address existing human rights problems. The full text of the submission is available here.

In addition to providing written information to the Human Rights Committee, TIHR, IPHR and partner organizations will participate in an NGO briefing with members of the Human Rights Committee shortly prior to the start of the review of Turkmenistan. They will also attend the review as observers and seek to make use of informal opportunities to contribute additional information.

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