



Appeal to the EU:

Use Human Rights Dialogue with Turkmenistan as Opportunity to Insist on End to Intimidation and Harassment of Civil Society

Brussels, Minsk, Sofia, Belgrade, Almaty, Moscow, The Hague, Oslo, 17 June 2010. On the eve of the third round of the EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue, which is scheduled to take place in Ashgabad on 18 June 2010,¹ the International Partnership for Human Rights, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, the Moscow Helsinki Group, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee appeal to the EU to use this meeting as an opportunity to publicly reiterate support for Turkmen civil society and to request concrete measures from Turkmen authorities to ensure that Turkmen civil society activists can carry out their important work without fear and repression.

The current Turkmen government has taken some modest steps to reverse the policies of its predecessor, and these steps are to be welcomed. Many more steps are needed, however, as Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive countries in the world.² There are no opposition political parties, all media is state-controlled, and independent civil society groups cannot operate openly. Legal requirements for the registration of NGOs are highly prohibitive and individuals who are involved in activities to promote democracy, human rights and rule of law in the country face intimidation, harassment and other retaliatory measures by national security services. Also civil society activists who live in exile in other countries, as well as their relatives who remain in Turkmenistan have been subjected to intimidation by security services. It appears that the principle of collective guilt and punishment still is widely applied in this area and is used to target even those who have no direct association to “inconvenient” individuals.³

In a recent example, people who currently have no direct contacts with the family of Farid Tukhbatullin, an internationally renowned Turkmen human rights defender who has been living in exile in Austria since 2003, were questioned by national security officials in the city of Dashovuz in northern Turkmenistan. This is the city where Tukhbatullin used to live before he fled the country and where his mother and other family members still reside. On 5 June 2010, officials from the regional department of the Ministry of National Security visited several schools in Dashovuz to make inquiries about Tukhbatullin’s two sons, who like their father now live as refugees in Austria. The security officials wanted to find out where and when the two boys studied, and who their teachers, class mates and friends were. On the previous day, Tukhbatullin had given a presentation about the current situation in Turkmenistan at an event in Washington, DC, thus raising suspicion that the critical remarks he made at this event prompted the actions of the security services. Tukhbatullin’s sons have also been helping him in his efforts to attract international attention to human rights

problems in Turkmenistan. The incident has left Tukhbatullin concerned about the safety and well-being of his family members, as well as of acquaintances and others in Dashovuz who previously have been associated with him and his family in some way and therefore are potential targets of intimidation and harassment by security services.⁴

Tukhbatullin has previously suffered reprisals because of his civil society engagement. He was imprisoned in Turkmenistan on politically motivated grounds in 2002-2003, and his brother subsequently lost his job. In 2008, Turkmen diplomats “recommended” that Tuhbatullin “tone down” criticism of Turkmen authorities on the website of his current exile NGO, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR). National security officials also reportedly summoned individuals suspected of contributing information to the TIHR from inside Turkmenistan with a view to obtaining information about the NGO’s network of contacts in the country.⁵

Our organizations urge the EU, during its upcoming human rights discussions with the Turkmen authorities, to bring up this and other individual cases of concern regarding Turkmen civil society activists. We also urge the EU to insist that the Turkmen government take immediate and specific steps toward improving the situation of civil society in the country, in particular by calling on it to:

- In accordance with the undertakings it has made in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council,⁶ take effective measures to comply with its international obligations and commitments on freedom of expression, freedom of association and other fundamental rights and improve cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms to this end;
- Revise and simplify the requirements and procedures for NGO registration to enable independent NGOs to be formally established and registered without undue hardship and delay;
- Ensure that independent civil society activists can conduct peaceful and legitimate activities to promote democracy and respect for human rights without facing intimidation, obstruction or groundless interference by national security services or other authorities at any level;
- Promptly condemn and put an end to any form of intimidation and harassment targeting family members, acquaintances or others associated with independent civil society activists, including activists who live abroad.

¹ The EU Strategy for Central Asia that was adopted in 2007 foresaw the establishment of Human Rights Dialogues between the EU and each of the Central Asian governments. Two previous rounds of EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogues have been held, in 2008 and in 2009.

² Freedom House listed Turkmenistan as one of the nine most repressive countries in the world in its *Freedom in the World 2010* report. See <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1192>

³ For more information about repressive measures targeting civil society, see Human Rights Watch, chapter on Turkmenistan in *World Report 2010*, at <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87526>; and Amnesty International, *Individuals Continue to be at Risk of Violations in Turkmenistan*, 12 February 2009, at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR61/001/2009/en/d17a0647-f8ef-11dd-92e7-c59f81373cf2/eur610012009en.pdf>

⁴ For more detailed information about this incident, see article by Farid Tuhbatullin at <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1388>

⁵ See Amnesty International, *Individuals Continue to be at Risk of Violations in Turkmenistan*, 12 February 2009, p. 6, at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR61/001/2009/en/d17a0647-f8ef-11dd-92e7-c59f81373cf2/eur610012009en.pdf>

⁶ See list of recommendations that “enjoy the support” of Turkmenistan in UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Turkmenistan*, 6 January 2009, at http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session3/TM/A_HRC_10_79_Turkmenistan_E.pdf