

New Incidents of Harassment Reinforce Concerns about Safety of Individuals Viewed as Linked to Turkmen Exile NGO

Brussels, The Hague 19 July 2011. International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) condemn the hacking of the website of its partner organization Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), as well as other recent incidents of harassment targeting the organization. They are concerned about the safety and well-being of all individuals living inside Turkmenistan who the authorities link to this organization.

“The cyber-attack on this independent source of information on Turkmenistan once again demonstrates the vulnerability of anyone who challenges the official accounts of Turkmen authorities,” said Harry Hummel, NHC Director.

The website of TIHR, www.chrono-tm.org, was hacked Monday morning and has since then been displaying an error message. The hackers also left a message saying that they intended to make public information from the organization’s internal databases and posted a link to a list containing the email addresses of individuals who subscribe to news feeds from the website or who have commented on material posted there. There are concerns that Turkmen authorities may have got hold of this sensitive information, which included the emails of individuals inside Turkmenistan who could be endangered if it is revealed that they are involved in any kind of dissent.

The website of TIHR, which is based in Austria, has reported on human rights and other developments in Turkmenistan for the past six years. It is a major source of independent information on this country, where the flow of information is tightly controlled by the state. In the last two weeks, TIHR has provided independent coverage of the 7 July explosions at a weapons depot in the Turkmen city of Abadan. The Turkmen authorities have insisted that the impact of this incident was limited and have sought to restrict the circulation of alternative information. However, accounts, photo and video materials obtained by TIHR from contacts inside Turkmenistan have witnessed about widespread destruction and damage, mass evacuations and the death of possibly as many as hundreds of people.

A [statement](#) published by the Turkmen Foreign Ministry on 11 July denounced the publication of information disputing the official version of the Abadan events, in particular with respect to the number of victims. It described such information as “false”, “slandorous” and “provocative”. While the statement took aim at the Russian TV channel *Rossija* and did not directly mention TIHR, such an association was implied as both this and other foreign media outlets have referred to information from TIHR in their coverage of the tragedy.

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In another worrisome development, representatives of local authorities have repeatedly visited and put pressure on the elderly mother of TIHR's head, Farid Tukhbatullin, in her home city Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan. These officials have been inquiring about her children, where they live, what they do and how she communicates with them, specifically trying to find out mobile phone numbers and other details of her contacts with her children. While she has received numerous intimidating visits of this kind in the past month, their frequency has increased in the aftermath of the Abadan events.

"The recent developments surrounding TIHR have reinforced our concerns about the safety and well-being of TIHR contributors and followers, as well as relatives of TIHR members inside Turkmenistan," said Brigitte Dufour, IPHR Director.

TIHR has already previously been subjected to harassment. It has been warned to "soften" criticism of Turkmen authorities on its website. Individuals suspected of contributing information to the organization, as well as people associated with Tukhbatullin's family have been intimidated. In October 2010, the TIHR website was also attacked and much of its content was disabled for several days. The same month Tukhbatullin received **warnings** from credible sources that Turkmen security services are planning an attack on his life.

A press release from TIHR is available [here](#).

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