

Ms. Helga Schmid
Secretary -General
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
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04 March 2024

Dear Secretary -General Schmid,

In advance of your trip to Turkmenistan, the undersigned organizations request you express your strong concern to President Serdar Berdymukhamedov about Turkmenistan's continued failure to uphold its international human rights obligations and OSCE human dimension commitments, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of movement and the right not to be subjected to enforced disappearance. We strongly believe that OSCE should not expand its cooperation with Turkmenistan until there is tangible and verifiable progress in addressing major human rights issues.

We are particularly concerned about Turkmenistan's refusal to allow government critics to travel abroad. For example, Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev, a lawyer and activist, was denied exit from Turkmenistan on January 18, 2024. Mr. Allaberdyev was attempting to travel to Iran to receive medical treatment that is unavailable in Turkmenistan. His health has deteriorated considerably since he served more than two years in prison on fabricated charges of hooliganism, which were reprisal for his activism.

According to border authorities, Mr. Allaberdyev was not allowed to travel abroad because of the conditions of his parole. However, he has received no official written notice explaining this prohibition on travel. Moreover, on January 31, already after the incident at the border, the Balkanabad City Court convicted Mr. Allaberdyev under Administrative Offences Code Article 364 for the "obstruction of lawful activities of state and other bodies and their officials" and fined him 200 manats.

This is not an isolated incident. In another recent case in November 2023, journalist Soltan Achilova was banned from boarding a flight from Ashgabat to Geneva, Switzerland, despite having a valid airline ticket and visa. Ms. Achilova was invited to attend the Martin Ennals Award human rights ceremony in Geneva as a 2021 finalist. She and her daughter were subjected to multiple security screenings in the airport, their passports were deliberately damaged, and Ms. Achilova was strip searched twice by authorities.

Moreover, an illegal practice of long-term incommunicado detention of hundreds of people whom the government perceives as its opponents has continued unabated since 2003, despite repeated criticism of these policies in the UN and the OSCE. Many of these prisoners have been subjected to full isolation from the outside world for more than twenty years. From at least 95 documented cases of continued disappearances in prisons, more than thirty individuals have served their prison terms in full but are being held incommunicado past their sentence. This is not a matter of the past but a continued international crime.

These actions, as well as the overall severe suppression of civil liberties and denial of access to the country for foreign human rights organizations and international observers indicate a systemic disregard for human rights and international law, violate Turkmenistan`s Constitution, its OSCE human dimension commitments and international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to guarantee the exercise of the rights to freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and the right not to be subjected to enforced disappearance.

The OSCE, of which Turkmenistan is a participating state, should urge Turkmen authorities to stop harassing Mr. Allaberdyev, Ms. Achilova, and other activists and demand that the country`s leadership cease persecuting people for their critical position, their legitimate exercise of the freedom of expression or on the mere suspicion of their links to or interest in the actions of government critics abroad, as well as immediately stop enforced disappearances in prisons and release all people whose prison terms have expired. Turkmen authorities must immediately end the practice of harassing, intimidating and punishing Turkmen citizens at home and abroad for nonviolent civic activity.

Signatures:

1. Tadzhiagul Begmedova, Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Bulgaria)
2. Anrea J. Prasow, Freedom Now (USA)
3. Leila Nazgul Seitbek, Freedom for Eurasia (Austria)
4. Anara Ibrayeva, Public Association «Dignity» (Kazakhstan)
5. Artur Sakunts, Helsinki Citizens Assembly – Vanadzor office (Armenia)
6. Tolekan Ismailova, Human Rights Movement «Bir Duino – Kyrgyzstan» (Kyrgyzstan)
7. Ivar Dale, Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)
8. Vyacheslav Mamedov, Turkmen Civil Democratic Union (The Netherlands)
9. Brigitte Dufour, International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
10. Elena Shakhova, «Citizens` Watch», included in the register of «foreign agents» (Russia)
11. Eldar Zeynalov, Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan)
12. Evgeny Zhovtis, Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (Kazakhstan)
13. Farid Tukhbatullin, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (Austria)
14. Ucha Nanuashvili, Human Rights Center (Georgia)
15. Natalia Taubina, Public Verdict Foundation, included by the Ministry of Justice of Russia in the list stipulated by p. 10 art. 13.1 of the Federal Law «On NGOs» (Russia)
16. Sergei Davidis, Human Rights Defence Centre «Memorial», included by the Ministry of Justice of Russia in the list stipulated by p. 10 art. 13.1 of the Federal Law «On NGOs» (Russia)
17. Krassimir Kanev, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria)
18. Kate Watters, Crude Accountability (USA)
19. Yuri Dzhibladze, Freedom Files (Poland)
20. Dilrabo Samadova, Office of civil freedoms (Tajikistan)
21. Alex Postica, Promo LEX (Moldova)
22. Anki Wetterhall, The Swedish OSCE-network (Sweden)
23. Oleksandra Romantsova, Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)