

19 September 2017

While we are sitting in this warm room, some of us enjoying great coffee, in one particular OSCE member state – Turkmenistan, hundreds of people are serving long prison terms for the crimes they have never committed. Today I will name just three of them – three brave civil activists who simply wanted to make Turkmenistan a better place to live.

**Saparmamed Nepeskuliev**, received 3 years of prison on false drugs charges for reporting to independent press about poor roads and lack of drinking water in his hometown. UN Working Group found his deprivation of liberty arbitrary and urged the government of Turkmenistan to release him. So did the European Union and all major international human rights organizations. But the man is still in prison, suffering from various health risks.

Another activist, **Mansur Mingelov**, received 22 years in prison for documenting 11 cases of tortures he and other Balochi people went through while in detention in the Turkmen Drugs Police. After complaining about it to the President of Turkmenistan and the American Embassy in Ashgabat, he was rearrested and sent to prison. For 19 days he was on hunger strike claiming his innocence and demanding the authorities reconsider his case. The promised, but never kept their word.

Lastly, **Gaspar Matalaev** – received 3 years in prison for monitoring labor rights of citizens during cotton harvest campaign. By the way, as we speak, tens of thousands of public sector workers, including teachers and doctors, are picking cotton under the threat of losing their jobs.

Matalaev was arrested just two days after I published his report titled “They bring people to cotton fields in the back of a truck, like sheep for sale.” The day he was arrested, Turkmenistan’s president severely reprimanded the minister of National security.

He was held incommunicado for over 1 month until his family learned that he was officially charged with fraud and bribery. National security officers tortured him with electric shocks to confess he authored that report and to accept the official charges. He is still in prison, despite international calls for his release, including a call from the UN Human Rights Committee. Over 63 thousand people demanded his release on Freedom United platform.

Ladies and gentlemen, Turkmenistan has never been famous for respecting human rights, but with the coming of Asian Games – they are happening now – the government has lost all sense of proportion. I believe, and not only I, that it’s time for the OSCE as the largest regional institution, and individual member states to give an adequate assessment to Turkmenistan’s behavior and actions. Give it publicly and unconditionally.

These are only three cases, while there are many more. Activists Nepeskuliev, Mingelov and Matalaev must be released from custody now. The government of Turkmenistan should refrain from persecuting dissent in the future.