



DEN NORSKE HELSINGFORSKOMITÉ
NORWEGIAN HELSINKI
COMMITTEE

OSCE HDIM

Tolerance and Non-discrimination II, Prevention of Violence against Women,
01 October 2009, Lene Wetteland

Mr/Mdm Moderator, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the human rights centre Memorial in Moscow are grateful for this opportunity to present a short summary of the results of the research done on the conditions in the only women's prison in Turkmenistan. More details will be presented in our side-event tomorrow, and the final report will be published in English and Russian in the near future.

The report is based on interviews that our colleagues and we have made with eyewitnesses – women who are imprisoned in this prison colony, and their family members who visit them there.

The prison is located in the very north of Turkmenistan, close to the town of Dashaguz. It was intended for 800, max 900 inmates, but at the moment there are more than 2000 women there. There are not enough beds or bed sheets, and the queues for the cafeteria are long, as the cafeteria is built for only 1000 people. Family visits are strictly limited. Food is scarce and of poor quality.

Violations of the prison regulations, such as fighting in the cafeteria line or carrying a mobile phone are punished with a stay in the Punishment Isolator. The Isolator cell is approximately 1,5x2 metres on a dirt floor, the window is 50x50 centimetres, a bucket serves as the toilet, and there is one meal of balanda (soup) per day. In this region where the temperature reaches minus 30 degrees Celsius in the winter, the women are given no bed sheets and are not allowed to wear their overcoats. 8-10-12 people can be kept in one of these cells for 3 – 15 days. The conditions for the women put in the Isolator Cell are clearly inhumane.

You can also be put in the Punishment Isolator for attempting to commit suicide. Such attempts occur frequently, as the conditions in the prison are unbearable. No psychiatric assistance is provided, neither is medical assistance beyond the yearly check-up on tuberculosis. However, if you are ill with tuberculosis you are not isolated until you reach the very latest stage, and there is no medical attention provided.

For serious surgical operations and childbirth, the women are taken to the city hospital in Dashaguz. 2 guards and a doctor escort them there. During transport, the woman is handcuffed to the two guards. During the childbirth, both her hands are cuffed to the bed. As soon as the birth is over, the child is given to the relatives of the woman or an orphanage, and the mother is returned to her work in the prison colony on the following day.

The hard labour in the colony consists of preparation of wool. Our research has shown that parasites from the wool find their way to human lungs and thrive there during this work, and represent a serious health risk to the inmates. We insist that this kind of work being carried out with lack of even the most basic means of protection is unacceptable for these women.

Let me also bring to your attention that the practice of collective punishment in Turkmenistan leads to the fact that this prison colony houses not only criminals, but also several wives, sisters, even mothers of so-called enemies of the people. These women are close relatives of men who are suspects of or sentenced for crimes against former president Niyazov, or current president Berdymukhamedov.

Finally, I refer again to the letter presented here on Tuesday, in which 15 organisations underlined the importance of NGO access to Turkmenistan in order to further assess the current situation in prisons and elsewhere.

Thank you.