

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES IN TURKMENISTAN'S PRISONS MUST END

Statement by the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights

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Let me start with two recommendations:

- Strong, consistent multilateral pressure on the government of Turkmenistan to end enforced disappearances in prisons must be renewed and should be effectively coordinated among relevant international bodies, including the OSCE, the United Nations, and the EU, as well as among concerned states.
- At the same time, ODIHR and OSCE participating States should re-double their efforts and resources in the field of torture prevention and include enforced disappearances in the scope of their work to combat torture.

Enforced disappearance is a grave human rights violation, according to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment both for the disappeared and for their families, thus falling also under the scope of the UN Convention against Torture.

The crime of enforced disappearances continues unabated in Turkmenistan. The authorities lock people up in prison in total isolation from the outside world for many years, often for as long as 25 years, and in some cases for life. They impose this cruel and illegal punishment on people they consider a political threat to their absolute power due to their opinions, influence, or visibility. Since 2002, hundreds of disappearances in prisons have occurred in this country. The international campaign "Prove They Are Alive!" has documented over 120 cases. Of these, at least 27 individuals have died in custody due to torturous conditions and lack of medical care. The true number of people forcibly disappeared and who have died in custody is, no doubt, much higher.

The prison terms of over a dozen individuals on the list of the disappeared have already expired or will expire in 2019-2020, including those of Konstantin Shikhmuradov and Annageldy Akmuradov this autumn. This makes the issue of disappearance more urgent than ever. The fate of these individuals is unknown, except that of civic activist Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, who, instead of being released in March 2019 after having served his full 11-year prison sentence, was transferred from prison to a remote place of internal exile where he is living under police control in terrible conditions. Special attention to this group could mean the difference between life and death, as there is a high risk that they will receive new prison terms on fabricated charges.

For years, Turkmen authorities responded to international pressure on this issue with vague promises or incomplete, often misleading information, and avoided taking any real steps. Last year, international pressure mounted, including in the OSCE, the UN, and the EU, and finally brought limited initial progress. In spring and summer of 2018, the Turkmen authorities allowed unprecedented visits for relatives of a dozen recently convicted prisoners held incommunicado in the notorious high security prison Ovadan Depe; publicly committed to discussing a possible first visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances (WGEID) to the country; and accepted almost all UPR recommendations on enforced disappearances and related issues. These developments demonstrated the effectiveness of multilateral international pressure.

However, since September last year, this trend reversed when quiet diplomatic dialogue replaced public pressure. As a result, the Turkmen government re-entrenched its position. It has abruptly ended its dialogue with the UN WGEID on a possible country visit, stopped replying to its new inquiries, and has not included implementation of UPR recommendations on disappearances and related issues in its draft work plan. The circle of prisoners receiving visits has not expanded. Gulgeldy Annaniyazov was not released after the end of his prison term. As in the past, the state has failed to disclose information about the disappeared to families, Turkmen society, and the international community, has not implemented relevant decisions by inter-governmental bodies, and has avoided taking any significant steps to end this gross violation of human rights, instead simulating an ineffective “dialogue” with international organizations on this matter.

It is high time for this shameful game to stop and the barbaric practice of disappearing people to end.

The international community should finally gather its political will and find ways for an effective response to the challenge to the founding values and principles of OSCE posed by this continued horrific crime committed by the government of Turkmenistan, incompatible with membership in this organisation.