



Enforced Disappearances in Turkmenistan: International Pressure Yields Limited Progress, but More Steps Needed Urgently to Save Lives

Statement by the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

30 August 2018

On the solemn occasion of the [International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances](#), the [Prove They Are Alive! campaign](#) stands in solidarity with all victims of forced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons and their families. We urge the Turkmen authorities to immediately end this gross violation of human rights and call on the international community to increase pressure on Turkmenistan to halt this shameful practice.

Enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prison system is the country's most acute human rights problem. The international campaign Prove They Are Alive! has documented more than 120 cases of disappeared people in Turkmen prisons, some of them lasting for more than 16 years. According to estimates, the actual number of cases is several times higher. The victims of disappearances are held in full isolation from the outside world, without access to lawyers or representatives of international organizations. Their families have no contact with their loved ones in custody and no official information about their whereabouts, or even whether they are dead or alive. Moreover, authorities often subject relatives of the disappeared to harassment, arbitrary travel bans, loss of livelihood, and systematic pressure in an attempt to conceal any information about the disappeared.

Targets of enforced disappearances include people considered a threat to the authoritarian regime, including public officials, civic activists, religious activists, and independent journalists. They have disappeared after arbitrary detention, bogus, politically motivated charges, and rushed, unfair trials, and face torture in the country's prison system. Most of the disappeared were arrested following waves of repression in the early 2000s. However, several dozen arrests in 2016 and 2017 demonstrate that the current leadership continues this shameful practice. It is not a matter of the past that can be blamed on the previous president.

Held incommunicado for years, people continue to die in prisons. The campaign has documented almost 30 cases of deaths of the disappeared in custody. It is likely that the number of deaths is much higher. Just this year, we learned about the deaths of [Begmurad Otuzov, who died in prison in February 2018](#) after more than 15 years in full isolation, and [Allamurat Allakuliev, who died in March 2018](#) after 16 years of being held with no contact with the outside world. Such a deadly pattern, coupled with the government's failure to carry out thorough, prompt, and impartial investigations into the deaths, may constitute extrajudicial executions, according to international human rights standards. Most recently, in April 2018, [the UN Human Rights Committee found the government of Turkmenistan responsible for the 2006 torture and death in custody of human rights defender and journalist](#)

[Ogulsapar Muradova](#). She [was kept incommunicado from the moment](#) of her arrest until her tragic death in the secret Ovadan Depe prison. The Committee said Turkmenistan is under obligation to conduct an impartial investigation into the circumstances of Muradova's death and provide a remedy to her family, including compensation and rehabilitation of her name. Many more horrific cases of deaths of the disappeared cry out for justice and are a stark reminder of the urgency of the situation.

For years, the Turkmen authorities have avoided taking any real steps to end enforced disappearances. Instead, they simulated an ineffective "dialogue" with intergovernmental organizations on this issue. In response, international pressure on the Turkmen government mounted. In [November 2016](#) and [March 2017](#) respectively, the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Committee against Torture noted enforced disappearances as a grave and persistent violation by Turkmenistan of the UN Convention Against Torture and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In 2015 and 2016, the European Parliament twice [suspended its approval of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Turkmenistan](#) on human rights grounds, including enforced disappearances. The European Union persistently tries to find a solution through its annual Human Rights Dialogue with Turkmenistan. The UN [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#) (WGEID) communicated several cases to the government of Turkmenistan in 2017-2018. Ambassadors of 14 OSCE participating States sent a letter to Turkmen authorities in March 2018 on the 15th anniversary of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism report, demanding tangible progress in addressing enforced disappearances in the nearest future. [Delegations of 20 UN member states raised strong concerns about disappearances during the UPR of Turkmenistan in May 2018](#).

In the last few months, this growing international pressure has finally yielded initial limited results. According to reports, Turkmen authorities organized short visits for relatives of about a dozen recently convicted prisoners held in the notorious Ovadan Depe prison, who were previously held incommunicado; provided new – although incomplete – information on several cases to the EU and to the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances; and publicly committed to discussing a possible visit by this UN body to the country.

However small, these steps show that persistent international pressure works. But much more needs to be done to stop this horrific crime and end the suffering of the disappeared and their families. The Turkmen government knows the international community's demands. They are clear, concrete, and feasible. The solution to enforced disappearance is not exchanging some limited information with international organizations behind closed doors. The solution is to ensure immediate access to prisoners by their relatives, lawyers, and independent monitors. The solution is immediate contact for the forcibly disappeared with the outside world. The solution is not adding new prison terms for those whose sentence has ended, using the pretext of security concerns. The solution is immediately releasing those whose health is fragile. The solution is to prove that they are alive.

The international community, including all concerned OSCE institutions and participating States, should not miss this moment to step up pressure on the government of Turkmenistan and use all means of leverage available to save lives, including the prospect of applying the OSCE Vienna and Moscow Mechanisms.

The international human rights Prove They Are Alive! campaign has been working since 2013 to protect the rights of people held incommunicado in Turkmen prisons and to halt the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan. The campaign acts with the support of the international Civic Solidarity Platform and actively interacts with a broad range of human rights defenders, experts, and intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union. For more information, please see the campaign's website <http://provetheyarealive.org>.