



Turkmenistan: UN Chief Meets Autocratic Turkmen Leader

(New York, September 29, 2018) – UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has a rare opportunity to raise human rights issues directly with Turkmenistan’s autocratic president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Prove They Are Alive! international campaign said today. Guterres should urge Berdymukhamedov to end enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan’s prison system, the campaign said.

Guterres and Berdymukhamedov are scheduled to meet on September 29, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

“Enforced disappearances is one of Turkmenistan’s gravest and most persistent abuses, and key UN human rights bodies have called on Turkmenistan to put an end to it,” said Kate Watters, director of Crude Accountability, a member of the campaign. “Secretary General Guterres should not miss this rare chance to address the UN’s recommendations directly with president Berdymukhamedov.”

Turkmenistan is one of the world’s most closed and oppressively governed countries, and its president rarely travels outside the region and rarely meets with world leaders.

According to documentation by Prove They Are Alive!, an international campaign dedicated to ending enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, the government of Turkmenistan forcibly disappeared at least 121 people in the country’s prison system. According to the campaign’s estimates, the total number of victims of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan is in the order of hundreds. Most were sentenced following closed, patently unfair trials, after which the authorities denied them visits, letters, phone calls, and any other contact with family, lawyers and independent monitors, some for as long as 16 years. Nor have the authorities provided families of the disappeared information about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones in prison, or even whether they are dead or alive. Among them are two former foreign ministers, Boris Shikhmuradov and Batyr Berdyev.

In 2016 and 2017, [UN bodies](#) concluded that enforced [disappearances in Turkmenistan](#) are a major problem and noted the government’s failure to address it. In 2014, the UN Human Rights Committee found that the former foreign minister, Boris Shikhmuradov, is a victim of an enforced disappearance and many other violations and called on the government to release him. The government has ignored this recommendation. Most recently, in April 2018, the Committee found the government of Turkmenistan responsible for torture and death in custody of journalist and activist Ogulsapar Muradova who had been held incommunicado from the moment of her arrest.

The Turkmen government denies that enforced disappearances are a problem and for many years did nothing to stop this gross human rights abuse. In 2018, responding to mounting international pressure, it

has started allowing some family visits to Ovadan Depe, the notorious prison where many of the disappeared are believed to be held. The campaign called it a positive but limited step.

In another positive step, in September, the government accepted recommendations by 20 UN Human Rights Council member states on enforced disappearances, put forward during Turkmenistan's Universal Periodic Review. Among them were recommendations that the government provide information to families of all people believed to be held incommunicado and issue a standing invitation to UN expert monitors and bodies, which includes the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, to visit Turkmenistan. The Turkmen government has publicly said it is "in active dialogue" with the Working Group and discusses its possible visit to the country. Now, it has officially accepted a recommendation to make this visit happen.

Guterres should urge Berdymukhamedov to commit to inviting the Working Group for a country visit as soon as possible but no later than in 2019, the campaign said.

Enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan is an entrenched problem but it is also urgent, the campaign said. At least 27 of the disappeared are believed to have died serving out their lengthy prison sentences, and recently the authorities have begun turning over to families the bodies of their disappeared loved one after they have died. At the same time, the prison terms of at least 15 have either expired or are due to expire before 2020.

"Ending enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons is literally a matter of life and death," said Yuri Dzhibladze, president of the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, a member of the campaign. "By urging Berdymukhamedov to act now, Guterres can help save lives."

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