



Disappearances in Turkmenistan Must Stop!

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

August 30, 2019

The crime of enforced disappearances continues unabated in the Central Asian country of Turkmenistan, and on this International Day of the Disappeared, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign calls for an end to this barbaric practice.

Since 2002, hundreds of enforced disappearances have occurred in Turkmenistan, and the campaign has documented over 120 specific cases over the past six years. Of these, at least 27 individuals have died in custody. The true number of people forcibly disappeared and who have died in custody is, no doubt, much higher.

The prison terms of fourteen individuals on the Prove! campaign's list have already expired or will expire in 2019-2020. This makes the issue of enforced disappearance more urgent than ever. The fate of these 14 individuals is unknown, except that of civic activist Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, who, instead of being released after having served his full 11-year prison sentence, was transferred in March 2019 from prison to a remote place of internal exile where he is living in terrible conditions.

Special attention to this group of the disappeared could mean the difference between life and death, as there is a high risk that they will receive new prison terms on trumped-up charges.

For years, Turkmen authorities responded to international pressure on this issue with vague promises and incomplete 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 over a dozen recently convicted prisoners held incommunicado in the notorious Ovadan Depe prison; publicly committed to discussing a possible first visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances to the country; and accepted almost all UPR recommendations on enforced disappearances and related issues. These developments demonstrated the effectiveness of international pressure. However, since September 2018, this trend reversed when quiet diplomatic dialogue replaced public pressure and the Turkmen government re-entrenched its position. It has abruptly ended its dialogue with UN WGEID about a possible first country visit, stopped replying to its new inquiries, has not included implementation of UPR recommendations on disappearances and

related issues in its draft work plan, and has said it may not release disappeared prisoners whose terms expire due to “security considerations”. As in the past, it 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 issue. It is time for this charade to stop, and for the government of Turkmenistan to unconditionally Prove They Are Alive!

International pressure on Turkmenistan is more important than ever. The international community must demand that Turkmenistan stop the practice of enforced disappearance; allow international observers into prisons, including the infamous Ovadan Depe; permit family visits, medical care, and legal assistance to those in prison; and comply with international human rights standards regarding enforced disappearance and torture. Strong, consistent multilateral pressure on the government of Turkmenistan must be renewed and coordinated among relevant international bodies, including the United Nations, the OSCE, and concerned states.

The international human rights Prove They Are Alive! campaign has been working since 2013 to protect the rights of detainees serving long-term sentences in Turkmen prisons who, since their sentencing, have been held incommunicado, and to halt the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan’s prisons. 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 inter-governmental organisations, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union.

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 their families, thus falling also under the scope of the UN Convention against Torture. Turkmenistan has ratified both the Covenant and the Convention, and its constitutional framework stresses that domestic legislation must comply with international law. Turkmen criminal legislation does not permit full isolation of prisoners, regardless of the crime committed. Nevertheless, the authorities impose this cruel and illegal punishment on people they consider to be a political threat to their absolute power due to their opinions, influence, or visibility.

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