



Turkmenistan's Prison System and Political Prisoners

A briefing paper by the Prove They Are Alive! campaign

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Introduction

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign first published a report on the Byzantine conditions of the prison system in Turkmenistan in 2014. Our initial report, *Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan*, was primarily a description of conditions in the Ovadan Depe prison, located approximately 50 kilometers northwest of Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, in the Karakum desert. The report was based on testimony of former Ovadan Depe prisoners and others who spoke bravely about what they knew. It also included a section describing the physical space of the prison (the shape of the Cyrillic letter Ж, based on satellite images obtained from publicly available sources, analyzed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and supported by testimony from former inmates of the system). The prison was built on the express orders of then-President Saparmurat Niyazov, and the first prisoners were sent there as early as February 2003, upon completion of construction.¹

This update contains new information about changes in the manner of the Turkmen prison system's treatment of political prisoners and new details about treatment of prisoners in Ovadan Depe and other prisons and colonies in Turkmenistan's prison system, where the disappeared and political prisoners are being held.

The campaign is grateful to those who have agreed to speak with us about their experiences or about information they have.

¹ The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, Prove They Are Alive! campaign, September 2014, <http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Final-O-D-Report-September-2014-compressed.pdf>, hereafter – The Ovadan Depe prison report, 2014.

1. Changes in Treatment of Political Prisoners

Visitation at Ovadan Depe for Prisoners Held for Islamic Extremism

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign learned that starting in the end of January 2018, prisoners being held in Ovadan Depe prison on charges of religious extremism were allowed visitors. The first prisoners who were allowed visitation were the “Gülenists,”² and by May 2018, more prisoners being held on religious extremism charges were allowed visitation.

As the campaign reported in September 2018, on June 28 of that year, over thirty relatives were allowed visitation. Each prisoner was allowed no more than two adult visitors.³ According to Human Rights Center, “Memorial,” prisoners charged with religious extremism, who had earlier been held in complete isolation, have been allowed to receive packages and have visitation once every three months. This practice is ongoing, and continued at least through December 2019.

Accounts received by the Prove! campaign state that family members are taken by bus or car from Ashgabat to Ovadan Depe, where they meet with their imprisoned loved ones. According to one account, visitation occurs in a several story building. Prisoners are held in another building and brought to the visitation area. According to this account, the prisoners are already there when the visitors are brought in. Numerous accounts state that visitation occurs through a glass window, speaking through a telephone, and lasts for forty minutes. One source indicated that their meeting lasted longer than forty minutes, and that the conversation took place by phone through a glass wall. One of the prisoner’s hands was handcuffed under the table and the other hand was holding the telephone. They were unable to see the person in the next booth, but the conversation was audible. In this account, the campaign learned that a police officer was standing behind the prisoner and behind the visitor.

These visitations are, as far as we are aware, the first visitations by political prisoners at Ovadan Depe among those who were previously considered to be victims of enforced disappearance. Previous to the Prove! campaign, the government of Turkmenistan refused to acknowledge that there were disappeared individuals in the prison system. We now have information from multiple sources indicating that those who were previously unheard of, about whom their family members had no information, are now able to have regular visitations and receive packages.

While those who received visitation were all charged with religious extremism, by far not all prisoners charged with extremism were allowed visitation. Furthermore, none of the Novemberists—those charged with participating in the alleged coup attempt against former

² Turkmenistan: 18 Men Tortured, Sentenced in Unfair Trial. Teachers, Students of Turkish Schools Targeted. Human Rights Watch, June 9, 2017 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/09/turkmenistan-18-men-tortured-sentenced-unfair-trial>

³ The first public information about this development was published by the Human Rights Center “Memorial” on July 9, 2018: https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/vlasti-turkmenistana-razreshili-svidaniya-nekotorym-politicheskim-zaklyuchennym-v-ovadan

President Niyazov—or those who were accused of abuse of power or economic crimes have been allowed visitation.

In 2016, for the first time, the bodies of two of the disappeared Novemberists who died in prison were returned to their families.⁴ In 2017 and 2018, other bodies were returned to their families.⁵ The Prove! campaign has documented that at least 27 disappeared individuals have died in Turkmenistan’s prison system since 2003.⁶

2. Prison Complexes Including Ovadan Depe and Others

Ovadan Depe

As we reported in 2014, the first prisoners were sent to Ovadan Depe prison in February 2003. Located in the Karakum desert approximately fifty kilometers northwest of Ashgabat, the Ж-shaped⁷ prison was put in operation on the personal orders of the late President Saparmurat Niyazov to initially house political prisoners. Following the death of Niyazov in 2006, common prisoners were transferred there from other prisons, including the old Krasnovodsk prison, which was demolished in 2008. The prison conditions were brutal, and there is little reason to believe they are any different now.

Former inmate Akmukhammet Baykhanov described the conditions in his book, *Lost Souls of Ovadan Depe* (Потерянные души Овадан-Депе), which he published in 2016.⁸ His testimony also was published in *Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan*.⁹

The Prove campaign has learned that other prison structures were built near the Ж-shaped Ovadan Depe complex during the Niyazov period. Prisoners were held incommunicado in these other areas as well. These include a separate one-floor building to hold prisoners, which is located to the south of the main complex that comprises the prison AH-T/2, and a colony complex AH-K/3 to the southeast of and several hundred meters from the Ovadan Depe prison, where some prisoners are also held incommunicado.

⁴ List of the Disappeared in Turkmenistan’s Prisons, Prove They Are Alive! campaign, September 2019, https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/List-of-the-Disappeared-in-Turkmen-Prisons_Sept-2019_ENG.pdf. See the introduction, p. 1, and the chapter with biographies of the disappeared who deceased in custody, p. 53.

⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/former-top-turkmenistan-security-official-dies-in-prison/28239650.html>, 17.01.2017; <https://provetheyarealive.org/another-victim-of-enforced-disappearance-in-turkmenistan-akmurad-redjepov-dies-in-custody/>, 24.08.2017; https://provetheyarealive.org/death_begmurad_otuzov/, 13.03.2018.

⁶ This number is likely much higher, but because of the lack of information we have been unable to document the actual number of enforcibly disappeared who have died in prison.

⁷ As briefly noted in the introduction, Ovadan Depe prison is shaped like the Cyrillic letter Ж, which is visible from satellite images of the prison.

⁸ Akmukhammet Baykhanov, *Lost Souls of Ovadan Depe*, Turkmenskiy Alyans Sil Soprotivleniya: Tyumen—Ashgabat—Sakhra—Sayat, 2016; hereafter – *Lost Souls of Ovadan Depe*.

⁹ The Ovadan Depe prison report, 2014.

Some prisoners were transferred from other colonies to Ovadan Depe prison by train and as they exited the train a hood was placed over their heads, they were handcuffed, and taken to Ovadan Depe in a vehicle in which it was only possible to stand. According to one former political prisoner, only after they were placed in their new prison cells were the hoods removed from their heads. Their handcuffs were removed through the opening in the door, through which food was provided. The size of the cell, which held two prisoners, was approximately 2.5 meters by 7 meters, although the cells in the prison were are not all the same size. They were given water three times a day.

Political prisoners were held in stricter conditions than the other prisoners.

In the three-story main building of AH-T/2 there were six blocks with cells on both sides of the corridor—approximately 15 on each side. According to the testimony of a former prisoner, on one of the floors, in several blocks, the first room was a bathing room then the prison cells started. In AH-T/2, cells were larger on one side of the corridor than on the other. This is described in Baykhanov’s memoir.¹⁰

Here the prisoners were allowed to bathe once a week. In the main corpus of AH-T/2 there was never warm water, not even in the winter. In Ovadan Depe the prisoners were always rushed in the bath and were allowed 5-10 minutes. They were allowed to walk for fifteen minutes once a week.

In AH-T/2 when the political prisoners were taken outside of their cells to bathe or for exercise, hoods were placed over their heads while they were in the corridor. Only the legs of officers and soldiers were visible. Before they were brought into the corridor, they were handcuffed through the food window, and then a prison employee came into the cell and put a hood over their heads. They were taken to the shower once a week, with no hot water. They would take turns bathing and two or three guards would stand and watch—the doors were always kept open. It was very cold.

In a similar description, Geldy Kyarizov told the Prove! campaign:

“... We were given 15 to 20 minutes in the shower to wash and shave. Then we were made to run all the way back. The water was always cold. But as winter approached, ‘obizhenniki’ – prison downcasts – welded a gas stove out of old pipes; the stove blew up a couple of times, but still it allowed you occasionally to wash yourself with warm water.”¹¹

¹⁰ *Lost Souls of Ovadan Depe.*

¹¹ “Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison as Remembered by Geldy Kyarizov and Chronicled by Vitaly Ponomarev,” Prove They Are Alive! campaign, 2016, page 6. https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Five_Months_in_Ovan_Depe.pdf, hereafter - *Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison.*

As previous accounts have indicated, they also walked in a room without a roof on the third floor with a hood over the head. The only thing visible as they walked there was the floor underfoot. Walks were about 10-15 minutes.

In the winter, it was cold, and although there was a little heat, during the day it was cold, and only a bit warmer at night. The heating pipes were under the window, and during the day were hardly turned on. The prisoners were given pea coats. During a five year period, according to accounts, underwear and a tee shirt were only provided once.

There was no glass in the windows, and in the winter they were covered with plastic panes.

This information was also corroborated by Kyarizov's account: The cell was a poorly lit concrete box 7 by 3.5 meters with a high, four meter ceiling, a washbasin, and a toilet. The outer wall had two glassless windows with iron bar fittings, additionally covered with metal blinds, their slats turned upwards. During colder months, inmates covered the windows with plastic wrap. There was a heating pipe running along the wall. In the winter of 2006-2007, heating was cut off twice, each time for about 12 hours – the temperature in the cell dropped so low that it was impossible to sleep.¹²

Prisoners were fed through the food windows in the door to the cell, which were sealed after the food was brought. They were given plastic cups, which they kept because during the summer they had water. They also had plastic bowls and aluminum spoons. The prisoners were not allowed to sit or lie down during the day. According to the testimony of a former political prisoner, every 5-10 minutes the guards would look through the window into the room, so the prisoners protected each other—especially the older prisoners. Younger prisoners would stand in front of the window so that the guards could not see that someone was sitting. When the guard would look, and the one blocking the door would say, "Everything is fine. I am here." And in this way the older prisoners could rest a bit.

At one point the prisoners were provided toothpaste and a toothbrush once a day; they were taken back by the guards after use. This also corresponds with information from Kyarizov.

Once a year, each prisoner was entitled to a new black robe. Kyarizov was issued his new robe while in the Seydi colony before being transported to Ovadan Depe. No underwear was ever issued, and no change of underwear was available. A prisoner's only underwear consisted of the trunks and undershirt he was wearing when admitted. When these would wear out, "we were given a needle and thread to patch them up." Kyarizov was also brought to Ovadan Depe with no socks. When it got colder, a cellmate who had an extra pair gave them to Kyarizov.

Kyarizov's cellmate, whose footwear fell completely apart, was issued heavy old shoes with a nail sticking out of the sole. *"He had to bend the nail hitting it with the other shoe."*

"Footwear was also issued once a year. When I came to Ovadan, I was wearing flip-flops. They got worn out, because we paced the cell all the time – there was nothing

¹² *Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison*, page 4.

else to do there. But no one brought me another pair. During lunchtime, some downcasts took my flip-flops, mended them, and brought them back during the evening meal.”¹³

In Ovadan Depe no parcels, letters, or visitation were allowed for political prisoners.

In the past two years, we have received information about construction work at Ovadan Depe and the transport of a number of the prisoners from there to Turkmenabad and Nebit Dag.

Special Blocks in Colonies

Other special blocks were built in 2003-2004 in the colonies at Seydi (LBK-12), Dashoguz, and Akdash. The majority of these special blocks, with the exception of Seydi, continue to be used after the death of Niyazov, and several of these special blocks are still in existence today.

Ovadan Depe itself was initially a part of the Krasnovodsk prison, where there were also special cells. However, in 2008 the old Krasnovodsk prison, which was built in 1949, was demolished and the prisoners who had been held there were transferred to Ovadan Depe.¹⁴ There is evidence that in 2006-2007 a number of prisoners were held incommunicado in the Abdushukur prison in Turkmenabad.

Some of the Novemberists and high-level government bureaucrats were sent to these other special blocks where they were held in isolated areas for political prisoners.

According to one account, they lived in one large room, which was about 10 by 20 meters. There was no lock, but the territory was surrounded by a high fence, and nothing was visible outside of it. In addition to the barrack, there was a bathhouse (a cellar where the furnace was heated), a latrine pit, and benches that the prisoners had made themselves out of stones so that there was a place to sit, especially for the elderly, to bask in the sun. There was one entrance to the territory with a sealed iron door. There was no medicine and no work. The prisoners were allowed to be outside during the day, and they were allowed to bathe twice a week.

In the winter there was heat and they were able to heat water. The windows were covered with polyethylene panels. There were no parcels, letters, or visitations in this block of the prison.

According to Baykhanov, the conditions in the special block in the colony at Seydi were noticeably worse than those at Akdash. Former law enforcement officers were held at Akdash.

In 2004, prisoners from the special blocks in Akdash and Seydi began to be sent to Ovadan Depe for ostensibly violating the prison regime. Prisoners were brought from the special blocks to

¹³ *Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison*, page 7.

¹⁴ Turkmen authorities demolished a prison because of “deficit of prisoners” (in Russian), Reuters, 25.06.2008, <https://ru.reuters.com/article/topNews/idRUDYO53754020080625>

detention centers inside the colony for three to fifteen days under various pretexts. In these detention centers, prisoners were held in single cells without a bed or chair. The trials took place in the colony headquarters. There were no lawyers and no sentence was given.

Conclusion

The prison system in which political prisoners are held is more extensive than previously understood, with special blocks in numerous prison complexes, including, but not limited to Ovadan Depe.

Regardless of the fact that some of the prisoners charged with religious extremism have been allowed visitation, a large number of the disappeared continue to be held in complete isolation without any contact with the outside world despite the fact that this type of isolation contradicts Turkmenistan's national legislation and its international commitments.

As we learn more about the extent of the system and its brutality, it is more important than ever that the international community demand the government of Turkmenistan prove that those who are held incommunicado are alive, and provide them access to their relatives, legal counsel, medical care, and international observers.

For more information contact:

Prove They Are Alive!

P.O. Box 2345

Alexandria, VA 22301 USA

www.provetheyarealive.org

The international human rights campaign, Prove They Are Alive! has been working since 2013 defending the rights of those prisoners who are held in complete isolation in the prisons of Turkmenistan, and demands that the government of Turkmenistan cease the practice of enforced disappearance. The campaign works with the support of the international Civic Solidarity Platform and actively cooperates with a wide circle of human rights defenders, experts, and governments. It also works with intergovernmental organizations including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union. More information about the Prove They Are Alive! campaign is available at <http://provetheyarealive.org>.