



Top USCIRF officials:

Supporting Turkmenistan's dictator is not in the interest of the United States

Statement by the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign

June 29, 2020

Prove They Are Alive! campaign welcomes the statement of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom officials that the U.S. government should hold Turkmenistan accountable for its many human rights violations.

On June 24, 2020, two top US officials from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the chair of the Commission Gayle Manchin, appointed by Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, and member of the Commission Gary Bauer, appointed by President Donald Trump, authored [an article for Eurasianet](#) that criticizes gross human rights violations in Turkmenistan and calls for tougher U.S. policies towards the authoritarian state.

"Supporting an outlandish dictator who tramples on the basic rights of his people is not in the interest of the United States," write Manchin and Bauer.

Among many human rights violations committed by the Turkmen authorities, the USCIRF officials specifically emphasize the issue of prisoners of conscience condemned under "vague and unsubstantiated charges of 'extremism' or 'inciting religious hatred'." Many of them were sentenced in secret and rushed trials or were simply disappeared in prisons.

The authors reiterated that USCIRF has [recommended](#) since 2000 that the U.S. State Department designate Turkmenistan a Country of Particular Concern as one of the world's worst violators of religious liberty, and has done so again in the Commission's [2020 Annual Report](#). In 2014, the State Department implemented this recommendation but has included since then a national security waiver that negates punitive consequences.

Turkmenistan has enjoyed neutral – almost friendly – treatment from the United States thanks to its close proximity to Afghanistan. According to the authors, this needs to change.

“There is little evidence that Berdymukhamedov’s neo-Stalinist state – which has [refused](#) to even acknowledge the receipt of U.S. assistance – is at all concerned with American interests. As the U.S. presence in neighboring Afghanistan evolves, so too must [its] regional policy,” say Manchin and Bauer.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign supports the statements made in the article and urges the U.S. government to take actionable steps and keep the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its gross and systematic human rights violations.

Turkmen authorities have a track record of systematically violating its international human rights obligations for almost three decades. In particular, the government of Turkmenistan is responsible for the [enforced disappearance of at least 121 individuals in the country’s prison system](#), torture, and death in custody of the disappeared. Family members have no information about their loved ones since their disappearance—in some cases for 18 years, which also amounts to torture. At least several dozen of the disappeared have died in prison as a result of terrible conditions and lack of health care. In our view, this terrible pattern amounts to extrajudicial execution. Only recently, after much pressure from civil society and inter-governmental organizations, has the government started to return bodies of the deceased to their families. Most of those who died in complete isolation in prison remain buried unnamed in mass graves, and their loved ones have not been able to pay their last tributes to them. In addition, the sentences of a number of the disappeared have already ended or will be complete in 2020, and these prisoners have not been released. Their whereabouts are unknown, and the authorities ignore inquiries of international organizations and diplomats about their fate. This is a slap in the face to the international community.

The European Union has refused to sign a permanent economic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Turkmenistan for over a decade in large part because of its gross human rights violations. Ambassadors of 14 member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including the US Ambassador, sent a letter to Turkmen authorities in 2018, demanding to put an end to enforced disappearances and providing a list of benchmarks of tangible progress in the “nearest future”. Nevertheless, disappearances continue unabated in Turkmenistan.

In 2018, the United States banned the import of cotton from Turkmenistan. Although the government failed to provide a reason for the ban, the Cotton Campaign, an international coalition working to stop slave and child labor in the cotton industry, had been advocating to ban import of Turkmen cotton that was harvested with forced labor.

Taking further steps, implementing accountability policies towards Turkmenistan's authoritarian government to keep it accountable for gross and numerous human rights violations will advance U.S. interests in Central Asia and improve peace and security in the region.

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>.