



Statement on the International Week of the Disappeared

May 31, 2021

Every last week of May, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign joins the global community in observing the International Week of the Disappeared. On this occasion, the Prove! campaign remembers all those who have been forcibly disappeared in the prisons of Turkmenistan and renews its resolve to fight against enforced disappearances.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has documented over 120 cases of enforced disappearances in the Turkmen prison system, and we believe many more cases remain undocumented. These individuals have been sentenced to long-term prison terms on a variety of trumped up charges since the early 2000s, but they share one common trait: in some way they ran afoul of the country's authoritarian leadership, which tolerates no dissent. Holding people in complete isolation from the outside world, with no information to their loved ones for many years or access to legal or medical assistance is a gross violation of Turkmenistan's national legislation and of its international obligations, and is a human rights crime.

As the world is heavily affected by the coronavirus pandemic, we are deeply concerned about the health and safety of the disappeared in Turkmenistan. The government has denied the existence of COVID-19 cases in the country, forbidding people even to say the word "coronavirus". Conditions in the prison system are ripe for rapid, unchecked transmission of the virus. Prison conditions in Turkmenistan, especially in the infamous Ovadan Depe prison where most political prisoners and the disappeared are held, are horrific. Widespread use of torture, poor sanitation, extremes of heat and cold, absence of a nutritious diet, and close quarters in the prison cells provide a dangerous environment for prisoners' health in normal times, never mind during a pandemic.

We are also concerned about the potential for additional violation of human rights in the prison system more generally during the pandemic. The campaign has learned that since a year ago, prison visitations and package delivery have been halted. This measure has led to further isolation of prisoners.

In an even more despicable violation of human rights, a number of those who are disappeared in Turkmenistan's prison system have not been freed after their prison terms ended. Although their terms are over, they continue to be disappeared in a system that routinely tortures inmates and forces them to live in inhumane conditions. With the exception of one individual who was transferred to internal exile, the families of these people have no idea where they are or what their circumstances are. This is a violation not only of international human rights law, but of Turkmen legislation. Not a single norm of Turkmen laws allows for the concealment of a prisoner's place of detention or the status of their health.

The completion of prison sentences for an entire group of disappeared prisoners in Turkmenistan's prisons, whose fates are closely monitored by the international community, provides the government of Turkmenistan with a legal opportunity and simultaneously imposes on it a legal obligation to release these people. This can be the beginning of a resolution of the problem of enforced disappearances in prisons.

We call upon the international community to renew pressure on the government of Turkmenistan to immediately stop enforced disappearances. Any international cooperation with the government of Turkmenistan must be contingent upon positively resolving the problems of the disappeared in prisons. The denial by the Turkmen authorities of its continued heinous practice of disappearing people in prisons and their unwillingness to take any real actions to address this massive humanitarian crisis can no longer be tolerated.

Inclusion of enforced disappearances in the expanded OSCE commitment on torture prevention in 2020 puts on OSCE participating States, executive bodies and institutions additional responsibility to vigorously address the problem of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan and in particular publicly demand that the Turkmen authorities release individuals whose terms have expired immediately and unconditionally.

This International Week of the Disappeared, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign reiterates its commitment to stand in solidarity with the victims and their families in the struggle for a world without disappearances. We believe that the right to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence must be ensured to all persons everywhere in the world, including Turkmenistan.

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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>.