



Statement by the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign on the International Day of the Disappeared

August 30, 2021

Today, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign joins the global community in observing the International Day of the Disappeared. On this occasion, the campaign remembers all those who have been forcibly disappeared in the prisons of Turkmenistan and reiterates its commitment to fight against this abhorrent crime. The campaign calls on all concerned individuals, states, and intergovernmental organizations to renew their resolve to put an end to enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons.

Since 2002, hundreds of enforced disappearances have occurred in Turkmenistan, when people were sentenced to long-term prison terms on a variety of trumped up charges. The campaign has documented over 120 specific cases of disappearances. Of these, at least 29 individuals have died in custody. The true number of people forcibly disappeared and who have died in custody is, no doubt, much higher.

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 human rights crime and a gross violation of Turkmenistan's national legislation and its international obligations, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Moreover, enforced disappearance is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment both for the disappeared and their families, thus falling 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 continue to 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.

As the world continues to be heavily affected by the coronavirus pandemic, we are deeply concerned about the health of the disappeared in Turkmenistan. Authorities continue to deny the existence of COVID-19 in the country but information about a high number of the infected and a growing number of related deaths is reported by independent sources. Prison conditions, especially in the infamous Ovadan Depe prison where most political prisoners and the disappeared are held, are horrific and are ripe for unchecked transmission of the virus. 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, and more so during a pandemic. Since spring 2020, prison visitations and package delivery have been halted, leading 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.

The names of individuals whose prison terms have ended in 2017-2020 but who continue to be illegally disappeared include **Annageldy Akmuradov, Mamour Atayev, Esen Buriev, Isa Garataev, Bazar Gurbanov, Rustem Djumaev, Batyr Sardzhaev, and Konstantin Shikmuradov**. Prison terms of at least two more persons, **Orazmammet Yklymov** and **Ovezmurat Yazmuradov**, expire in the fall of 2021. Prison terms of **Iskander Kurbanov** and a few others will end in 2022. One person, **Gulgeldy Annaniyazov**, served his full term in March 2019, but instead of being freed, he was transferred to internal exile in a remote area of the country where he is living in extremely poor conditions and suffers from health problems.

As the Prove! campaign has repeatedly stated, the completion of prison sentences for an entire group of disappeared prisoners in Turkmenistan's prisons 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.

In the UN system, three years have passed since Turkmenistan undertook voluntary commitments under the UN Universal Periodic Review to end disappearances in prisons, combat torture, improve the situation in the prison system, and organize visits to the country by the UN Human Rights Council special procedures. The failure of the Turkmen government to include a plan to fulfill these key commitments within the framework of the UN UPR Roadmap speaks louder than any words and declarations.

In the OSCE, inclusion of enforced disappearances in the expanded commitment on torture prevention adopted in December 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.

As we approach a tragic 20th anniversary next year of the beginning of the heinous practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, we strongly call on concerned states and representatives of the OSCE, the UN, and other inter-governmental bodies to renew their efforts and use each and every opportunity to demand from the government of Turkmenistan to end enforced disappearances, including at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, UN Human Rights Council sessions, UN General Assembly, OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting, OSCE Permanent Council, other multilateral fora and in bilateral relations. Any international cooperation with the government of Turkmenistan must be contingent upon positively resolving the problem of the disappeared in prisons. The denial by the Turkmen authorities of its continued illegal 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.

On the International Day of the Disappeared and every day, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign stands in solidarity with the victims of disappearances and their families in their struggle for truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence – everywhere in the world, including Turkmenistan.

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The international human rights campaign Prove They Are Alive! 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>.