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Twenty Years after the Start of Mass Repression in Turkmenistan, the International Community Must Take Strong Action to Stop Enforced Disappearances

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

On the somber occasion of the International Day of the Disappeared, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign remembers all those who have been forcibly disappeared in the prisons of Turkmenistan and calls on the international community to reconfirm its commitment to fighting against this heinous crime.

The criminal practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmen prisons started 20 years ago and continues to this day. Since 2002, hundreds of people in Turkmenistan have been sentenced to long-term prison terms on a variety of trumped up and politically motivated charges. They are kept in complete isolation, without access to legal help or medical care. Their relatives have not had any official information about their loved ones for many years.

Many of the disappeared were sentenced to long prison terms that have already expired, but their status remains unknown. Some of them have passed away while serving their time.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has documented 162 cases of disappearances in Turkmenistan since 2002. Of these documented and verified cases, 97 are continuing disappearances. The government continues to impose this cruel and illegal punishment on people it considers to be political threats to its absolute power due to their opinions, influence, or visibility.

Not only it is an abhorrent crime to hold people incommunicado for years, it is also a gross violation of the rights of the relatives and families of the disappeared, which equates to torture.

Enforced disappearance is degrading treatment both for the disappeared and their families and falls under the scope of the UN Convention against Torture. It is a gross violation of Turkmenistan's national legislation and its international obligations, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Over the years, the international community has repeatedly demanded accountability, including at the OSCE, UN, and EU, as well as in bilateral discussions.

Despite these many efforts, the government of Turkmenistan fails to meaningfully address its acute problem of enforced disappearances, does not engage with international human rights organizations, and refuses to confirm that the disappeared are alive.

As we approach the 20th anniversary of the beginning of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, we urgently call on concerned states and representatives of the OSCE, the UN, and other intergovernmental bodies to use every opportunity to increase pressure on the government of Turkmenistan, demanding the release of those who have served their terms, and the immediate cessation of the practice of enforced disappearances.

On this tragic day, and every day, we stand in solidarity with the disappeared and their loved ones. We call on states, governments, and intergovernmental bodies to immediately address the problem of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan.

*“The shadow of our quiet hope will stay at home,
Reflected in the eyes of those who remember us.”*

– Batyr Berdyev, disappeared in 2002

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>.