



November 2022

Twenty Years Since the Beginning of Mass Repression in Turkmenistan,  
OSCE Participating States Should Take Strong Action to Stop Enforced Disappearances

This November, we remember dozens of people held incommunicado in Turkmenistan's prisons since 2002. The criminal practice of enforced disappearances was first used by the Turkmenistan government to intimidate society and stifle political dissent twenty years ago. The Prove They Are Alive! campaign calls on the OSCE participating states to develop concrete plans to push the government of Turkmenistan to eradicate enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan and restore justice to the families and victims of this gross human rights violation.

The criminal practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan was first used by the government against a group of political opposition leaders that was accused of an alleged coup attempt against then-President Niyazov on November 25, 2002. In the wave of mass repression that followed this event, a group of high-profile government and military officials known as the Novemberists was arrested, swiftly and unjustly tried, and sentenced to long prison terms.

These prisoners have not had access to legal representation or medical care, nor have they been allowed any contact or correspondence with the outside world, including with their families, who do not know if their loved ones are dead or alive.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has documented 61 cases of enforced disappearances of persons accused of involvement in the alleged coup attempt, and 3 cases of people sentenced for allegedly helping Novemberists' family members flee from Turkmenistan.

The victims included former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Boris Shikmuradov and former Ambassador to the OSCE and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Batyr Berdyev.

In 2003, in response to this wave of mass repression, the OSCE participating states invoked the Moscow Mechanism with respect to Turkmenistan. Within the framework of that Mechanism, OSCE Special Rapporteur for Turkmenistan, Dr. Emmanuel Decaux, issued a report documenting the extensive human rights violations that were perpetrated in the arrest, trial, and subsequent imprisonment of the Novemberists.

Despite international pressure, the government of Turkmenistan continues to ignore most inquiries about the fate of this group of victims. Moreover, in the last 20 years, enforced disappearances have become a systematic practice in Turkmenistan. Since 2002, the government of Turkmenistan has forcibly disappeared hundreds of people sentenced to long-term prison terms on political and religious grounds and on a variety of trumped-up charges.

In total, 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.

Thirty-three of the disappeared have served their terms in full, but their fate remains unknown.

Following the adoption by consensus of the MC Decision 7/20 on Prevention and Eradication of Torture in December 2020, the OSCE participating states bear a new responsibility to take stronger action to eradicate enforced disappearances in the OSCE region, including in Turkmenistan.

The 20th anniversary of the beginning of mass repression in 2022 gives new urgency to the need for concrete action from the OSCE. Attaining tangible progress in eradicating enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan is important not only for the restoration of justice for the victims and their relatives, but also for all of Turkmen society, the members of whom are at risk of enforced disappearance if they are perceived by the authorities to be a threat to the status quo.

We urge the US Helsinki Commission to join us in demanding an immediate stop to the practice of enforced disappearances and that the government of Turkmenistan Prove They Are Alive!

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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>.*