

A Common Vision for the Advancement of Human Rights in Turkmenistan

This Common Vision is the unique product of the thorough work of 24 Turkmen citizens supported by several international NGOs. We, citizens of Turkmenistan, wish to present the most appalling human rights violations in Turkmenistan under Berdymuhamedov today and introduce concrete recommendations for the international community, which is now actively involved in this formerly closed country.

We are pleased to see the start of intensive contact between the countries of the West and the government of Turkmenistan. We believe that new possibilities are being presented at this time; possibilities that can, on the one hand, lead to the economic and political inclusion of Turkmenistan in global processes, and on the other hand, begin to correct the monstrous legacy of the previous totalitarian regime.

We believe that contact between western governments and the leadership of Turkmenistan can and must play a role in both processes. At the same time, however, we ask you to remember the connections between the cost of economic contacts with Turkmenistan and the value of human rights, human life and the dignity of Turkmenistan's citizens.

We draw to your attention the fact that human rights violations are numerous and widespread, systemic in character, and **purposefully supported by the authorities in Turkmenistan.**

- There is **no pluralism** in the country. There are no political parties. All political and social activity is strictly controlled by the authorities. It is impossible for NGOs to work legally. All civic activists are under constant control of the secret police, undergo psychological pressure, and are subject to physical threats made against them and their relatives.
- There is absolutely **no freedom of speech** in the country. All news media is affiliated with and strictly controlled by the government. Any public expression of differing opinions is impossible. Repression includes interviews and publication in foreign mass media. Access to the Internet continues to be censored.
- The practice of **collective punishment** (as it is called) is widespread. This is when the arrest and conviction of a person leads to the arrest (or other repression or disenfranchisement of the rights) of his/her closest relatives. This form of punishment was used widely during the Niyazov regime, and continues today. It serves to more fully aggravate the official punishment and causes even crueler psychological suffering. This practice has no justification and deserves unequivocal condemnation.
- Information received from the prisons in Turkmenistan indicates that its **penal system** is among the worst in the world. Especially troubling are the unhealthy conditions in which women prisoners are forced to work.

- The rights of **national minorities** continue to be violated in many ways. Although national minorities comprise over twenty percent of the population, not one minority has the all inclusive conditions it deserves in which to preserve its cultural norms and identity, including the opportunity to study its own language and customs. This is particularly true for young people, who do not have access to cultural centers, museums and press in their national languages. Over thirty thousand Beludzhi have been forced to assimilate because of these conditions.
- **Religious activity** remains under tight government control. Religious communities that are allowed to gain state registration have to report regularly to the government, cannot freely build or open places of worship, and cannot freely publish or import religious literature. Islam remains under tight state control: the state authorities name all imams, control the only officially-approved education for imams and decide when and where new mosques will be built. Many religious minority communities have been denied legal status and the possibility to function openly. Police intermittently harass religious communities. Some active religious believers are on the exit blacklist and cannot leave the country. Five Jehovah's Witnesses are serving sentences for refusing compulsory military service.
- The Constitution of Turkmenistan does not include **the right to freely leave the country**. As a result, citizens are frequently denied the freedom to leave the country or are pressured and manipulated when applying for the right to leave Turkmenistan. Journalists, civil society activists, and the relatives of those in prison are forbidden from leaving the country.
- **The economic system** of Turkmenistan remains paternalistic, lacking in transparency, corrupt and in many ways archaic; it lacks the most basic market mechanisms. The social fabric of the country is also totally corrupted. The Turkmen public is completely isolated from any information about the colossal resources from the sale of gas and from any possibility to influence the financial politics of the authorities.

The human rights concerns listed above illustrate well the systemic character of the human rights violations in Turkmenistan, and create a sufficient basis for the start of an objective conversation with the Turkmen authorities about the absolute need to surmount these violations and the **essential conditions** for the development of long-term political and economic relationships.

We understand the concerns of western countries regarding energy security for Europe, concerns that have led to such intense interest in Turkmenistan's energy potential. However, **we do not understand** why the standards for evaluating human rights conditions in the country have been severely diluted, and the unwillingness of the international community to condemn fundamental human rights abuses publicly when they arise.

We appeal to all interested parties—the European Parliament, the United States Congress and Senate, national European parliaments, and governments and governmental bodies—to acknowledge the existing human rights problems in Turkmenistan.

We appeal to you to give the highest priority to motivating the government of Turkmenistan to rapidly dismantle the existing **systematic** repressive system.

We appeal to all western financial institutions, including the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and European Investment Bank, to make planning and realization of their programs in Turkmenistan and connected to Turkmenistan (for example, the Nabucco pipeline, Southern Energy Corridor and others), dependent on the readiness of the Turkmen authorities, not only to discuss human rights issues, but also to take concrete steps toward concrete results.

We make the following initial recommendations to the government of Turkmenistan as necessary conditions for the development of political and economic relationships:

- Stop the practice of collective punishment, and unconditionally release the family members of imprisoned individuals.
- Stop the practice of recruiting prisoners to coercive labor that is dangerous to their health, and provide medical assistance to those who are already suffering.
- Create all the conditions for the harmonious development of the culture and tradition of all national minorities, with no exceptions.
- Create all the conditions for the formation and development of independent mass media and outlaw state censorship.
- Guarantee the possibility for the creation and independent operation of public organizations, including the transformation of the existing NGO law.
- Reject the practice of suppressing dissent, and stop the persecution of dissidents and civic activists.
- Completely ban the practice of forbidding free entrance into and exit from the country.
- Create standards to guarantee economic transparency, in particular ensuring public access to information on the return of finances from the sale of energy resources and the creation of mechanisms through which to influence the use of this revenue.

As a gesture of good will and as a first step toward the resolution of these problems, we appeal to the government of Turkmenistan to provide

independent, international observers with **ongoing** access to the country-- first and foremost to its prisons.

In total, twenty-four citizens of Turkmenistan, permanently living in the country, have signed this document.*

We, representatives of international civil society organizations, have read this letter and support its contents fully.

On 10 November 2009 signed by:

Said Yakhyoev, **Bank Information Center**, USA
Huub Scheele, **BothENDS**, Netherlands
Mark Fyodor, **CEE Bankwatch Network**, Czech Republic
Sonia Zilberman, **CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation**, South Africa
Robert Hårdh, **Civil Rights Defenders**, Sweden
Nicholas Hildyard, **the Cornerhouse**, United Kingdom
Antonio Tricarico, **CRBM (Campagna per la riforma della Banca mondiale)**, Italy
Kate Watters, **Crude Accountability**, USA
Jonas Christoffersen, **the Danish Institute for Human Rights**, Denmark
Sebastien Godinot, **Friends of the Earth**, France
Gavin Hayman, **Global Witness**, United Kingdom
Manana Kochladze, **Green Alternative**, Georgia
Martin Kryl, **Hnutí DUHA (Friends of the Earth)**, Czech Republic
Holly Cartner, **Human Rights Watch**, USA
Vitalyy Ponomarev, **Memorial Human Rights Centre**, Russian Federation
Ludmilla Alexeeva, **Moscow Helsinki Group**, Russian Federation
Bjorn Engesland, **Norwegian Helsinki Committee**, Norway
Masha S. Feiginova, **Turkmenistan Project, Open Society Institute**, USA
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We ask that any comments or view points to the common vision are addressed to: Advisor Ivar Dale, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Kirkegata 5, 0153 Oslo, Norway E-mail: dale@nhc.no

*These individuals cannot sign this letter in fear of their own safety and that of their families.