



**Submission from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee
Universal Periodic Review of Turkmenistan
October 2012**

In its submission for the Universal Periodic Review in December 2008, Turkmenistan underlined its foreign policy priority of cooperation with international organisations, especially the UN, and expressed its commitment to fulfil its international obligations. The submission also states that the report is based on information from voluntary organisations.¹

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee considers that Turkmenistan has failed to follow up on its stated intentions to cooperate with international organisations and to fulfil international obligations since its previous Universal Periodic Review.

Turkmenistan has long been kept on the side-line when international institutions like the EU have broadened their cooperation and partnership with its neighbours to the east. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) has been kept on hold for the last six years, and specific benchmarks have been set as precondition for any further negotiations with the country. At the same time, there is an increasing interest in booming construction in the closed country, as well as its vast natural resources, and there are discussions in the European Parliament to reopen discussions on the PCA.

Long imprisonment sentences after closed trials are the rule rather than the exception in Turkmenistan, and the practice of collective punishment is widespread. A large number of criminal cases are retaliation for political activity. The long list includes cases against Sapardurdy Khadjiev and Annakurban Annaklychev, as well as the case against Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, who have been kept in incommunicado detention since 2006 and 2008 respectively. More recent short-term arrests include activist Bisengul Begdesenov, RFE/RL correspondent Dovlet Yazkuliev and Editor Jumageldi Mulkiev. Other activists and journalists are subject to violence, threats and harassment. Activist Natalya Shabunts found a severed sheep's head on her door step after having criticised the conduct of presidential elections in the country.

Also religious believers are put in prison for carrying out their belief. This includes conscientious objectors as well as believers accused of unregistered religious activity. Few religious organizations have been registered since this possibility re-occurred in 2004, and those that are registered are subject to strict control. Religious literature is confiscated and censored, and there are restrictions on religious education. Freedom of religion or belief is severely restricted for those belonging to so-called non-traditional religious communities, coinciding with the extensive discrimination of minority groups in Turkmenistan, including Azeri and Iranian Shia Muslims, Armenian Apostolic Christians, Jews and religious minorities such as Pentecostals, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

There is a widespread practice of discrimination of people with dual citizenship of Russia and Turkmenistan. The government had announced that people, who obtained their Russian citizenship before the entry into force of Turkmenistan's new Constitution that prohibits dual citizenship, would be able to maintain the right to have both citizenships. However, in practice, these people are not able to get the new biometric Turkmen passport, and they are not able to find a job neither in the state services, nor in any state institution, undertaking or organization. Government policies seem aimed at ousting these people from the country through these unprecedented discriminatory

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/TMSession3.aspx>

practices. The main objective seems to be to restrict freedom of movement and ensure that no one is able to leave the country without permission of the government.

On the political level, Turkmenistan is controlled by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and his circle. No election has ever been free or transparent in Turkmenistan, and the OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission did not see that even a limited election observation mission would add any value to the Presidential elections in February 2012.² Engaging in politics on an independent platform is impossible in practice, even if the President now has established a second government-supportive party, the Agrarian Party.

Among other areas of serious concern in are the rights of women, who have a second-rate position in society. There is no law against domestic violence, polygamy is widespread, and discrimination of women takes place in education as well as in the work sphere. Even women clothing is dictated in the smallest detail. Finally, the overall dismal health care system is a particular threat to women who tend to go through many births. To get a son is preferred by most families, and women who only get girls may be pressured to new pregnancies.³

If the international community is to have access to verified information on human rights issues on the ground international organizations should be permitted to work freely inside the country, gathering information and checking facts. As of today, no international human rights organization is operating in Turkmenistan. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has only been allowed one ad hoc visit to a Medical Correctional Facility, not a sufficient alternative to the regular prison monitoring the ICRC is carrying out elsewhere. The humanitarian organization Doctors without Borders was forced to leave the country in December 2009. The only UN Special Rapporteur to ever visit the country was the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2008.

Travel restrictions apply to employees of foreign human rights organizations and independent journalists as well as to the country's own citizens. Foreigners are frequently denied entry, and Turkmen citizens who are on a travel black list due to their own or any relative's actions are banned from leaving the country. Also Turkmens who study abroad have been denied exit permission to continue their studies after spending their summer holiday in Turkmenistan.

There is no independent trade union in Turkmenistan, and a very limited number of activists who, to great danger for themselves and family members, try to shed light on the dismal human rights situation. There is no independent media, and access to internet is limited. No voluntary organisations dare to criticize the government publicly and there is therefore no possibility that any country report by Turkmenistan is based on information from them.

We consider that Turkmenistan has been and continues to take active measures to keep independent human rights researchers from collecting information on violations inside the country, and deliberately provides falsified statistics and indicators in correspondence with international organisations. As such, what limited information is available on the current situation must be considered to be merely the top of the iceberg, and Turkmenistan's stated intentions to prioritise cooperation with international organisations empty promises.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee remains deeply concerned about the current human rights situation in Turkmenistan, which begs improvement on every aspect of human rights.

² <http://www.google.no/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.osce.org%2Fodihr%2Felections%2F86861&ei=Y7pqUOL4D-ip4gTRiYDgAQ&usg=AFQjCNG8W4CvBVBeWIWCYXmkAE48lat3sg>

³ NHC submission to 53rd session of UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 11 October 2012: http://nhc.no/no/nyheter/Women%3A+Turkmenistan%E2%80%99s+second-class+citizens.b7C_wlbQ07.ips