

Turkmenistan: No lasting security without human rights

The international community should send unequivocal message on neutrality anniversary

11 December 2020. During this week's lavish celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the declaration of state neutrality, Turkmenistan's international partners should remind its leadership that sustainable security and development are not possible as long as the authorities flout the rule of law and deny fundamental rights and freedoms to citizens. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) call on the EU and the wider international community to deliver this message in an open, frank and unambiguous manner that ensures it is heard by those in power and cannot be misused for government propaganda purposes.

"Rather than merely paying polite lip service to Turkmenistan's declared state neutrality, the country's international partners should tell its government – loudly and clearly – that lasting peace, security and justice cannot be achieved without respect for human rights and the rule of law," said Farid Tuhbatullin, TIHR Chair. *"The Turkmenistani regime is trying to use this anniversary to boost its international image and demonstrate that it enjoys international recognition for its supposed peace-building efforts, but the international community should not play along,"* he added.

Turkmenistan has been marking the anniversary of its neutrality declaration since the beginning of the year with various events ranging from to the opening of new state-constructed facilities to exhibitions and sport events. However, the peak of the celebrations will occur on 12 December, Neutrality Day, when a two-day international conference on "the significance of neutrality policies in ensuring international peace, security and sustainable development" will come to a close in Ashgabat with a grand banquet and gala concert.

The anniversary celebrations take place at a difficult time in Turkmenistan, one of the world's most closed countries, which consistently features at the bottom of international freedom ratings. While independent sources have reported about a serious, national outbreak of Covid-19 with growing numbers of people suffering and dying from acute respiratory conditions, the government has continued to insist that the global pandemic has not reached Turkmenistan.

To back up its Covid-19 narrative, the government has pressured medical workers to participate in covering up such cases, stifled discussion on such issues among residents and evacuated such patients from hospitals visited by experts from the World Health Organisation to prevent them from discovering the real situation with respect to the pandemic. It has failed to enforce adequate safety protocols for the treatment of Covid-19 symptoms and misinformed citizens about the reasons for preventive measures, arguing for example that they should wear masks in public because of allegedly increased levels of dust in the air. At the same time, the government has continued to mobilise citizens for state-organised mass events, such as those related to the neutrality anniversary in violation of social distancing and other containment measures enforced in other contexts, thus exposing citizens to a heightened risk of contracting Covid-19.

“Because of its reckless policies, the Turkmenistani regime has jeopardised the health, wellbeing and lives of citizens for the dubious honour of maintaining its status as a Covid-19 free country, along with North Korea and a few island nations,” said Brigitte Dufour, IPHR Director. *“The international community should not accept the regime’s lies at face value but use the neutrality anniversary to publicly hold it to account for the blatant human rights violations perpetrated in the country,”* she continued.

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, the pre-existing socio-economic crisis has also deteriorated further in Turkmenistan, with people being forced to stand in line for hours to buy basic, rationed food items at state stores selling them at subsidised prices. Despite the country’s vast natural resources, the population is largely impoverished and most residents cannot afford to buy food items at market prices from private retailers.

The government’s policy of Covid-19 denial and its inability to meet the basic needs of citizens have fuelled popular resentment. Although anyone who publicly criticises the authorities in Turkmenistan faces an imminent risk of persecution, a growing number of people have recently spoken out about their discontent with the government. Activists living abroad have published impassionate video appeals and staged a series of rallies calling for reform, while courageous Turkmenistan-based individuals have used social media to echo such sentiments and gathered for spontaneous protests to vent their frustration at the fallout of the socio-economic crisis. In response, the authorities have launched a new crackdown on dissent – intimidating, harassing, and detaining outspoken individuals and their family members. The authorities have also stepped up internet censorship to prevent citizens from accessing independent, foreign-based sources of information, which provide an alternative to national, state-controlled media.

As a participating State of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Turkmenistan has acknowledged that human rights are an integral element of security and that issues relating to this security dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to the international community. Thus, its regime cannot claim to be making any real progress on security without addressing criticism of its human rights record presented by other states and international institutions.

For more information on the current human rights situation in Turkmenistan, see the following TIHR-IPHR publications:

The chapter on Turkmenistan in Central Asia: Tightening the screws on government critics during the Covid-19 pandemic: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Central-Asia-Tightening-the-screws-on-critics-Nov-2020-1-1.pdf>

It came with the wind – Human rights impact assessment of the Covid-19 response in Turkmenistan: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Covid-19-Turkmenistan-report.pdf>