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REVIEW OF TURKMENISTAN UNDER THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

**Submission to the United Nations Human Rights
Committee ahead of its review of Turkmenistan's third
periodic report under the ICCPR at its 137th session (27
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Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is the successor organization of the Helsinki Group of Turkmenistan and was registered as an independent association in Vienna in November 2004. Through a network of local experts and activists inside Turkmenistan, TIHR monitors and reports on the human rights situation in this country. It also disseminates independent news, comments and analysis from and about Turkmenistan.

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Introduction

This is a submission to the UN Human Rights Committee ahead of its review of Turkmenistan's third periodic report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It has been jointly prepared by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), drawing on their ongoing cooperation on documenting fundamental rights developments in Turkmenistan. It is based on information obtained by TIHR through its monitoring of the situation in Turkmenistan with the help of an in-country network of activists, as well as information from other independent organizations, which monitor and report on developments in the country. It is an updated/adapted version of the report prepared by TIHR and IPHR prior to the Committee's adoption of its List of Issues on Turkmenistan and also addresses questions covered in the List of Issues adopted by the Committee.

In March 2022, Turkmenistan saw an **orchestrated transfer of power** from father to son, with Serdar Berdymukhamedov assuming the presidency after his father Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who had held this office since 2006. The presidential elections were manifestly unfree and unfair and offered voters no real choice. After stepping down as president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has **remained a powerful actor**, holding the position as chair of the People's Council, the upper house of parliament. In January 2023, parliament voted to bestow the ex-president the title of "National Leader of the Turkmen People" and to retransform the People's Council led by him into a separate entity, serving as the highest body of power in the country. With its members including the president, members of the cabinet of ministers, parliamentary deputies and other government officials, the retransformed People's Council will have the right to change the constitution, adopt constitutional laws, and determine domestic and foreign policies.¹ These steps will consolidate the ex-president's influence and **further reinforce the concentration of power** in the country. For this reason, they are also likely to **contribute to cementing the repressive policies**, which were seen under the ex-president's reign and which have persisted since his son's appointment as president. Currently the authorities in Turkmenistan continue to severely restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, in violation of the country's obligations under the ICCPR.

The current submission **covers the implementation of the ICCPR in a number of key areas in Turkmenistan**. It highlights the wide-ranging restrictions on the freedom of expression, including state media control, internet censorship and lack of government transparency on issues of public concern such as the national Covid-19 outbreak, which the authorities have persistently denied. The submission also documents the lack of space for independent human rights NGOs and opposition political parties to operate in the country, persecution of civil society members both at home and abroad (including through their relatives) and suppression of rare spontaneous protests in a context of continued forcible mobilization of residents for state-organized mass events. In addition, the submission draws attention to the ongoing problems of politically motivated imprisonment, torture and disappearances; the harsh prison conditions in the country; and the continued use of forced labour in the cotton harvest. Finally, it covers concerns about reinforced efforts to promote so-called traditional values and to restrict women's and girls' rights.

1. Denial and cover-up of Covid-19 pandemic and other crises (articles 19, 6, 17)

The Turkmenistani government tightly controls the flow of information in the country, uses state media outlets as propaganda tools and restricts access to alternative sources of information (see more in the next chapter). To promote its own positive narratives of the situation in the country, the government also **denies and covers up developments that may reflect badly on those in power.**

For example, the government has **failed to acknowledge the scope and extent of the protracted economic crisis**, which the country has been experiencing for the last few years, and has sought to conceal manifestations of this crisis (such as long lines outside stores selling rationed food products at state subsidized prices).² The government has also sought to cover up the impact of natural disasters in the country, such as a devastating hurricane that hit the country in April 2020. Instead of focusing on assisting hurricane victims, the authorities **went after citizens believed to have shared photos and video clips of the havoc caused by it** with relatives and other contacts living abroad. According to TIHR's information, several dozen people were detained and warned on these grounds and two women faced criminal charges for allegedly insulting officials when questioning the actions taken against them.³

The **government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic fits into the same pattern**: it has persistently claimed that the global pandemic has not reached the country, although independent sources have reported about a serious national outbreak.⁴ This has resulted in Turkmenistan being **the only remaining country in the world to have reported zero Covid-19 cases** as of the beginning of 2023.⁵

As part of its policy of Covid-19 denial, the government **pressured medical workers** to participate in covering up the national Covid-19 outbreak and threatened them with repercussions should they leak information about Covid-19 cases.⁶ In an attempt to prevent medical workers from documenting and sharing Covid-19 related information, the authorities reportedly banned doctors treating suspected Covid-19 patients from using their mobile phones at work and carried out inspections of the phones of medical workers working at such facilities.⁷ Medical professionals also faced **intimidation for raising concerns** about the lack of adequate resources for the diagnosis and treatment of people with acute respiratory conditions indicative of Covid-19.⁸

According to information obtained by TIHR and other independent organizations, the authorities **prevented a delegation from the World Health Organization (WHO) from finding out the real state of affairs with respect to Covid-19** during a visit to Turkmenistan in summer 2020. In particular, the authorities transferred patients with Covid-19 symptoms out of the hospitals the WHO experts were due to visit.⁹ Following their visit, the WHO experts stopped short of saying that the virus was present in the country but stated that they were "extremely concerned" about "numerous reports of an increasing number of acute respiratory infections or pneumonia of unknown origin" and called on the authorities to "take the same measures as in those countries where the virus has begun to spread".¹⁰ Later, in a media interview in November 2021, a senior WHO official said that: "From the scientific point of view, it's unlikely that the [Corona]virus is not circulating in Turkmenistan".¹¹

In accordance with the WHO's recommendations, the Turkmenistani government took measures aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19, but these measures were **selectively enforced** and the authorities **failed**

to explain the real purpose of them to citizens. For example, the authorities referred to the allegedly increased levels of dust in the air and the alleged risk of viruses being carried by airborne currents from abroad to justify such measures. Moreover, the government failed to comply with its pledge to allow the WHO to independently gather Covid-19 samples in the country and bring them to its laboratories for testing.¹²

As part of the authorities' cover-up efforts, relatives of people who died to due Covid-19 like symptoms received the bodies of their loved ones in sealed packages and were requested to bury them immediately without opening the packages.¹³

Because of its cover-up and denial policies in relation to Covid-19, the Turkmenistani government **not only violated citizens' right to have access to information** on issues of public importance but **also jeopardized their lives and well-being**.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Adequately inform citizens about economic hardships, natural disasters, pandemics and other crises that directly affect them, as well as measures taken in response to such crises.
- Cooperate constructively and transparently with international organizations and experts on crisis response with a view to safeguarding the well-being and rights of citizens.
- Safeguard the right of citizens to document, share information and raise concerns related to different crises and other issues of public concern without facing retaliatory measures.

2. Media control and restrictions on access to alternative information (article 19)

Media control

Turkmenistan's Law on Mass Media, adopted in 2012¹⁴, safeguards freedom of the media, obliges the state to guarantee media independence and pluralism, and prohibits censorship and unlawful interference in the activities of media. However, in practice, **the media situation remains extremely repressive**, with Turkmenistan consistently being ranked at the bottom of international surveys, such as the well-known World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders. In the 2022 edition of this index Turkmenistan ranked 177th, with only Iran, North Korea and Eritrea behind.¹⁵

As previously, there are **no truly independent media outlets in the country**, and all national media outlets (including the few privately owned print media outlets) are **subjected to state control and interference with their editorial policies**, which both directly and indirectly result in censorship. In particular, the Turkmenistani authorities use state-owned media as platforms for the dissemination of state-dictated information about the situation in the country and the government's policies. The president has publicly called on national media outlets to focus on reporting about positive developments and achievements of the government.¹⁶ Journalists working with independent media outlets based abroad face persecution (see more in chapter 3).

Restrictions on internet access

Turkmenistan's Law on Mass Media protects the right of citizens to enjoy unimpeded access to foreign media products, and the authorities have committed themselves to ensuring unhindered access to different sources of information, including the internet.¹⁷

However, in practice, **the authorities restrict access to information from foreign sources, in particular through the internet.**

Internet access in Turkmenistan remains **slow compared to international standards**. The Speedtest Global Index has repeatedly ranked Turkmenistan third last in its monthly assessment of the average speed of fixed broadband connections,¹⁸ while the site Cable.co.uk for the second year in a row ranked Turkmenistan last in its assessment of broadband speed in 224 countries and territories across the world in the period from mid-2021 to mid-2022.¹⁹

Internet services are also expensive. For example, the monthly cost of the cheapest, unlimited broadband internet access rate offered by the state monopoly internet provider, *Turkmentelekom* is about 10 percent of the minimum monthly salary for city residents and five percent for rural residents.²⁰

The **internet penetration rate in the country remains comparatively low**, although it has increased in recent years. There are no reliable official statistics, but according to the Digital report, internet penetration in Turkmenistan was 38% as of the beginning of 2022.²¹

Moreover, internet access is **heavily censored**. Many social media networks, messenger apps and independent Turkmenistan-covering websites have been arbitrarily blocked in the country. An investigative report published in 2019 by Qurium, a Swedish-based non-profit organization focusing on digital security, found that the Turkmenistani authorities use several different techniques (DNS spoofing, HTTP Host Header Inspection and IP blocking) to restrict access to online resources, including more than 130 of the most popular websites worldwide.²² Based on its sources, the Netherlands-based Turkmen News reported in October 2022 that as many as 1,2 billion IP-addresses, or one third of all existing IP-addresses had been blocked in Turkmenistan.²³

Blocked online resources are only accessible in the country with the help of internet circumvention tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs). At the same time, the authorities have **stepped up efforts to prevent the use of VPNs**, including by systematically blocking such tools and intimidating both those who provide VPN installation services and those who use VPNs tools to access sites featuring information critical of the authorities.²⁴ As part of these efforts, law enforcement authorities have also carried out arbitrary checks of the mobile phones of residents, including children to inspect whether they have installed VPNs to access independent news and other blocked sites.²⁵

The government recently announced plans to create **"an autonomous national digital network"**²⁶, with a government working commission being established to look into this matter in December 2022²⁷. No details have been made public about the nature of the proposed new network, but there are concerns that the authorities might seek to introduce a national state-controlled network disconnected from the global internet, thereby further restricting internet use in the country.

Continued campaign against satellite dishes

Since Turkmenistan's second periodic report was reviewed in March 2017, the Turkmenistani authorities have **continued their campaign against privately owned satellite dishes devices**, which residents use to watch and listen to foreign TV and radio channels as an alternative to national state-owned channels. Arguing that satellite dishes "spoil the appearance" of residential buildings, the authorities have arbitrarily dismantled such devices, not only in the capital and other large cities, but also in other parts of the country.²⁸ As a result of this campaign, the number of satellite dishes has significantly decreased in the country. While the authorities have made some efforts to provide access to cable TV or internet protocol television (IPTV) instead, such efforts do not appear to have been systematic and these alternative solutions have come with additional costs for residents, as well as strings on the content available.²⁹

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Enforce in practice the ban on media censorship set out by the Law on Mass Media and take concrete steps to enable media outlets to operate free from undue state interference, as previously recommended by the Committee.
- Adopt effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability in the country, and safeguard residents' freedom to seek, receive and impart information through the global internet.
- Stop the practice of arbitrarily restricting access to internet sites and other foreign sources of information and ensure that any measure taken in this regard meets the strict requirements of necessity, proportionality and legality required by article 19 of the ICCPR.
- Refrain from intimidating and harassing those who install and use censorship circumvention tools to access internet resources that have been arbitrarily blocked.

3. Persecution of civil society members (articles 19, 21, 22 and 14, 7, 9, 17)

In the last few years, the Turkmenistani authorities have further **increased pressure on critical voices** in response to growing expressions of discontent with the government, in particular through social media platforms and during rallies against the government's repressive policies held by Turkmenistani migrant communities abroad.³⁰ In their widening crackdown on dissent, the authorities have targeted **both outspoken activists who live outside Turkmenistan and individuals inside the country** who have publicly criticized the government's policies and/or who have been in contact with groups or activists abroad. **Relatives of activists** have also been subjected to intimidation.

Targeting critical voices inside Turkmenistan

Any criticism of the situation in the country or any civic engagement perceived as threatening by the authorities may result in persecution in Turkmenistan, ranging from surveillance and threats to arrest, prosecution and imprisonment on politically motivated charges. The following are recent examples of

cases in which individuals have been imprisoned after daring to stand up for their rights, speak out against injustices and communicate with independent Turkmenistani groups and activists based abroad:

- On 16 July 2021, Turkmenistani law enforcement authorities arbitrarily detained **Khursanai Ismatullaeva**, an Ashgabat-based doctor who had turned to exile-based human rights groups for help in her struggle for justice over her unfair dismissal from a perinatal clinic.³¹ Her detention came the day after her case was raised at an online event organized by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). For almost two weeks, there was no information about her whereabouts or the grounds for her detention; after this, it turned out that she was in pre-trial detention on criminal charges brought against her.³² On 7 September 2021, Ismatullaeva was sentenced to nine years in prison for fraud, document forgery and taking advantage of a dependent person – all offenses allegedly committed in relation to an elderly, disabled man, whom she had previously cared for. At the trial, she was not assisted by any lawyer of her own choice as all lawyers her family approached refused to take up the case given its politically sensitive nature. Human rights groups and MEPs repeatedly called for her Ismatullaeva's release.³³ In a welcome development, reported by the Turkmen News and the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Ismatullaeva was released in December 2022 after being pardoned by the president on the occasion of Neutrality Day.³⁴
- Lawyer **Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev** was arrested by police in the city of Balkanabad on 5 September 2020 and subsequently handed a six-year prison sentence on charges of hooliganism and intentionally inflicting moderate bodily harm for allegedly getting into a fight with another man, who had attacked and tried to provoke a conflict with him.³⁵ Rights groups believe that the lawyer was targeted because of his alleged links to members of the anti-government protest movement abroad. Following his arrest, law enforcement authorities reportedly questioned him on this issue, while rejecting his request to see medical reports of the alleged injuries he was accused of inflicting on the other man. Allaberdyev's family was not allowed to see him after he was arrested and his trial was held behind closed doors. Allaberdyev had no legal defence at the trial since several lawyers whom his family approached declined to work on the case, apparently out of fear for reprisals, while he refused the services of a government-appointed lawyer.³⁶ In an opinion published in May 2022, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Allaberdyev's detention to be in violation of international standards and called for his release.³⁷ According to Turkmenistan's Helsinki Foundation, Allaberdyev was released in December 2022. The details of his release are not known, but it is believed that he also benefited from the presidential pardon issued on the occasion of Neutrality Day, under which over 300 people were released in total.³⁸
- **Nurgeldy Khalykov** is serving a four-year prison sentence on fraud charges believed to be retaliation for his contacts and cooperation with the Netherlands-based media and human rights organization, Turkmen News.³⁹ A local Ashgabat court handed down the sentence on 15 September 2020, allegedly based on a complaint that Khalykov had failed to repay a private debt. Khalykov was first detained in July 2020 after sharing with Turkmen News a photo of WHO representatives who visited Turkmenistan that month to investigate the Covid-19 situation. The photo had been taken by Khalykov's former schoolmate who posted it on Instagram. At the time of his detention, Khalykov had cooperated clandestinely with Turkmen News for several years and contributed information on different topics, including the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁰ Turkmen News believes that the authorities found out about his work for the organization during questioning and fears that he might have been subjected to ill-treatment in detention.⁴¹ While serving his sentence,

Khalykov has reportedly been placed in solitary confinement on repeated occasions as punishment for alleged violations of prison rules.⁴² Among others, UN special procedures have raised concerns about Khalykov's case, including the "allegedly meritless charges, judicial harassment and seemingly arbitrary detention" facing him.⁴³ Human rights NGOs have repeatedly called for his release.⁴⁴

- On 16 August 2021, a court in Dashoguz sentenced **Murat Dushemov** to four years in prison on charges believed to be retaliation for his civic engagement, including his online criticism of the government and his attempts to question Covid-19 preventive measures imposed by the government, despite its denial of the national outbreak.⁴⁵ In an incident in June 2021, of which Dushemov posted a video on YouTube, he requested a doctor at an Ashgabat medical clinic to show the government order based on which compulsory vaccinations against Covid-19 were carried out.⁴⁶ The doctor subsequently accused Dushemov of extorting money in exchange for leaving the video unpublished.⁴⁷ In another incident, Dushemov, his friend and his friend's wife were stopped by police and asked to present negative Coronavirus tests as they were travelling by car from Ashgabat to Dashoguz in July 2021. They challenged this request, demanded to see the official document based on which it was made and protested by parking their car across the road after being made to wait for hours for the document. They were then detained, with Dushemov and his friend being handed 15 days' arrest, and his friend's wife a fine. When serving this sentence, Dushemov allegedly injured two co-detainees in what is believed to have been a staged act.⁴⁸ Based on these incidents, Dushemov was criminally charged and subsequently – at the August 2021 trial -- convicted of extortion, deliberately harming the health of others and hooliganism.

It is a great relief that two of the individuals whose cases are described above were released in December 2022. However, it is important that the authorities ensure comprehensive and impartial investigations into the circumstances of their detentions and hold accountable officials responsible for violations of their rights. Also, in particular given the harsh conditions within Turkmenistan's prison system, and the widespread pattern of torture and ill-treatment (see more in chapter 6), there are serious concerns about those who remain behind bars on politically motivated charges. In addition to those recently imprisoned in the cases described above, these include individuals who have spent many years behind bars such as human rights activist **Mansur Mingelov**. He was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in an unfair trial in 2012 after exposing torture and ill-treatment of members of the ethnic Baloch minority.⁴⁹ The Netherlands-based NGO Turkmen News has reported that Mineglov has suffered serious health issues in prison, including as a result of beatings to which he was allegedly subjected after first being detained.⁵⁰ In 2018 he was in critical condition after contracting tuberculosis and being denied adequate treatment and was only hospitalized after his plight attracted international attention.⁵¹

In some cases, individuals imprisoned on charges considered politically motivated have continued to be deprived of their liberty following the expiration of their sentences. An example of this is the case of dissident **Gulgeldy Annaniyazov**, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison on illegal border crossing and related charges after returning to Turkmenistan from exile in 2008. For years, he was held incommunicado and denied contact with his family. When his initial sentence expired in 2019, he was not released but instead transferred to a remote village for spending another five years under police control.⁵²

In another worrying practice, former political prisoners have continued to be subjected to intimidation and harassment following their release, such as in the following case:

- **Agajuma Bayramov**, an elderly resident from Mary region was released in spring 2022 after spending six years in prison on charges believed to have been fabricated in retaliation for his exercise of his freedom of expression. He was prosecuted after first submitting numerous appeals to authorities and thereafter giving several interviews to the Prague-based Turkmen Service of RFE/RL on issues such as unemployment, corrupt practices in education, and problems with transportation.⁵³ Following his release, he has faced ongoing pressure, including by being held under police surveillance, being prohibited from leaving his home village and being detained and sent back when attempting to visit his relatives. Bayramov's relatives have also been subjected to intimidation, with security service officials demanding that they refrain from communicating with him. In November 2022, TIHR learned that Bayramov's internal passport (used for identification and travel purposes) was returned to him after reportedly having been arbitrarily confiscated before.⁵⁴ He was subsequently allowed short visits to family members, although pressure on him has continued.⁵⁵

Targeting activists based abroad

In addition to prosecuting people living in Turkmenistan because of their exercise of the freedoms of expression and association, the Turkmenistani authorities have **sought the detention and return of outspoken Turkmenistani activists based abroad**, above all in Turkey, a country with friendly relations to Turkmenistan and a large community of Turkmenistani migrants. The Turkmenistani authorities are believed to have handed over a list of activists to Turkish authorities in this context. In February 2022, the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation obtained and published a copy of this confidential document, featuring the names of 25 Turkmenistani activists who allegedly threaten national security in Turkey.⁵⁶ Several of the activists named on the list have been detained by Turkish police and threatened by return to Turkmenistan, where they would be at a serious risk of politically motivated arrest, imprisonment, and torture. These are two examples of such detentions:

- In October 2022, Turkish law enforcement authorities detained Turkmenistani activist **Vepa Orazmukhammedov**, who has openly criticized the situation in Turkmenistan in online video appeals and taken part in meetings initiated by foreign-based opposition movements. The Turkmenistani government had requested the issuance of an Interpol arrest warrant in his case. After **Orazmukhammedov** had been held in a deportation centre for several months, a local Turkish court ruled in March 2022 to release him.⁵⁷
- In September 2021, Turkish police detained **Dursoltan Taganova**, a Turkmenistani activist who is openly critical of the Turkmenistani government and has a large followership on social media. She was held her for two days in a deportation centre before being released following interventions by her lawyer proving her right to legally stay in Turkey.⁵⁸ This was the second time the activist had faced the threat of deportation from Turkey. Previously she was detained in July 2020 and held for two months pending return to Turkmenistan – formally for a migration violation but, in reality, for her involvement in the protest movement against Turkmenistan's government.⁵⁹ At that time, following an international campaign in her support, Taganova was eventually released and granted the right to legally stay in Turkey during the examination of her asylum application.

In a similar fashion, other Turkmenistani activists detained in Turkey have also been able to legally challenge their detention, and no activist is known to have been sent back from this country to Turkmenistan to date. However, activists in Turkey remain at the threat of detention and possible forced return to Turkmenistan.

There have also been several cases in which Turkmenistani activists based in Turkey have been detained and physically assaulted when gathering outside Turkmenistan's consulate in Istanbul to express their discontent with the policies of its government:

- As reported by the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, on 16 August 2022, a group of Turkmenistani activists accompanied by Turkish colleagues were attacked and beaten by a group of unknown, masked perpetrators after arriving to the consulate in Istanbul to hand over a letter to President Berdymukhamedov concerning violations of the rights of citizens. As a result of the attack, several of the activists were injured. In addition, three people were detained by Turkish police at the consulate's request and were held for several hours before being released. The victims of the attack filed a complaint with local police about the incident, with the investigation still being under way at the time of writing.⁶⁰
- On 1 August 2021, Turkmenistani activists attempted to hold a peaceful rally outside the consulate in Istanbul to protest against the government's repressive policies. However, Turkish police dispersed the protest participants and detained ten activists, holding them for a few days before releasing them without charge. The police officers claimed that the protesters did not have the required permission for the protest, although they had notified local authorities in advance.⁶¹ Human rights groups later learned that the consulate had filed a complaint with Turkish police, falsely accusing the protesters of endangering the safety of its staff and "disturbing peace and tranquillity."⁶² According to eyewitnesses, a group of young men, believed to have been engaged by Turkmenistani authorities, also arrived at the protest venue and attacked protesters, verbally assaulting them and injuring several activists.⁶³ Blogger **Farhad Durdyev** alleged being forcefully apprehended by unknown perpetrators on his way to the protest and taken to the consulate premises, where he said he was arbitrarily held for several hours, beaten, and pressured to apologize for his government-critical videos.⁶⁴ No one is known to have been held accountable for these attacks.
- In connection with another planned peaceful protest outside the consulate in Istanbul on 19 July 2020, Turkish police detained some 80 people and held them for several hours before releasing them.⁶⁵ Turkish police justified the detentions with Covid-19 related restrictions on holding assemblies, but there were reports indicating that Turkmenistani diplomats had requested the planned protest to be stopped.⁶⁶ Prior to the protest, the consulate filed a written complaint with Turkish police accusing several activists of obstructing the work of its staff and threatening them with violence – allegations which were not substantiated.⁶⁷

Turkmenistani activists living in Turkey and other countries abroad have also faced other forms of intimidation and harassment because of their civic and social media engagement and their criticism of the Turkmenistani government. For example, activists have been singled out for government-orchestrated **smear campaigns** denouncing them as "traitors", **threatened** by security service officials, and put under pressure through **intimidation targeting their relatives** in Turkmenistan. In a number of cases, Turkmenistan-based relatives of activists living abroad have been detained, questioned and warned that they might face serious repercussions unless the activists stop criticizing the authorities.⁶⁸

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani government should be requested to:

- Stop persecuting citizens living in- and outside the country because of their criticism of the current situation in Turkmenistan and their contacts with like-minded individuals to discuss, exchange information and engage on issues of concern to them. Also, refrain from intimidating and harassing relatives and associates of critical voices.
- Ensure, in particular, that no one is criminally charged, declared wanted, arrested or imprisoned because of their expressions of discontent or their civic engagement; and promptly review any convictions handed down against citizens in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and urgently release them, including Nurgeldy Khalykov, Murat Dushemov and and Mansur Mingelov. As long as these individuals remain behind bars, the authorities should ensure that their treatment fully corresponds to international standards.
- Ensure that individuals released after serving sentences believed to have been politically motivated, such as Khursanai Ismatullaeva, Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev and Agajuma Bayramov are not subjected to continued pressure; and carry out comprehensive and impartial investigations into the allegations of human rights violations surrounding their detentions, hold accountable all officials responsible for violations, and grant them compensation for the violations suffered.
- Facilitate effective and impartial investigations by Turkish police into the reported attacks on activists at the premises of Turkmenistan's consulate in Istanbul with a view to holding those responsible to account.

4. Restrictions on freedom of assembly (article 21)

Restrictions on assemblies in law and practice

Turkmenistan's Constitution safeguards the right of citizens to freedom of assembly (article 43). The Law on the Organization and Conduct of Gatherings, Meetings, Demonstrations and Other Mass Events, which entered into force in 2015⁶⁹, allows residents and organizations to organize rallies and other assemblies if they inform the authorities in advance and agree on the venue with them. At the same time, the law **grants wide discretion to local officials to refuse to permit assemblies** on the grounds that the proposed venue is unsuitable. It also sets out that assemblies, **as a rule, should be held in venues specifically designated for this purpose** once such venues have been determined. One-person pickets can be held without informing local authorities.

In practice, **public protests are an extremely rare occurrence in Turkmenistan** because of the repressive climate in the country and the risk of persecution associated with any public criticism of the authorities. However, in some cases, residents hold **spontaneous protests to express discontent** about issues of concern to them such as problems related to the protracted economic crisis in the country and to demand action from the authorities. The authorities have **sought to suppress such protests** using tactics of, on the one hand, intimidation of the participants and, on the other hand, persuasion. These are only a few examples:

- As reported by the Turkmen service of RFE/RL, on 10 January 2022, around 200 people gathered outside the local government office in the Farap district of Lebap region to express discontent with a drastic price increase on basic food staples sold at subsidized prices in state stores. The protesters called for measures to address this issue. However, local officials refused to talk to them. In addition, soon after the protesters had gathered, more than a dozen armed men reportedly arrived and cordoned off the government building followed by local police officials who reportedly

accused the protesters of attempting to carry out a “riot” and warned them that they might be “shot”. The protesters were frightened and quickly dispersed.⁷⁰

- In a case reported by TIHR’s sources, a group of women was standing in line to buy bread at a store selling food at state subsidized prices in the Turkmenbashi district of Dashoguz region on 9 May 2020 when the government head of the district passed by on his way to inspect an agricultural complex. The women surrounded him, expressed their frustration at the shortage of flour in the district and accused him of being responsible because he had ordered vast lands previously used for wheat farming to be turned into cotton fields. After escaping from the women, the government official called the police, who arrived at the spot and briefly detained the women for questioning.⁷¹
- According to TIHR’s information, in January 2019, a group of people gathered in the city of Dashoguz to complain to the regional offices of the General Prosecutor and the Ministry of National Security regarding the introduction of strict limits on the amounts of money that residents were allowed to transfer abroad. These restrictions created serious difficulties for residents wishing to transfer money to children studying abroad. Officials from the approached bodies threatened the protesters with detention, but did not follow through on their threat when the latter said that they would turn to higher-level officials. After submitting a joint written complaint to such officials, 12 people were eventually allowed to transfer additional funds to their children abroad.⁷²

Continued practice of mass mobilization of citizens

In a practice that the Human Rights Committee criticized when examining Turkmenistan’s second periodic report, the Turkmenistani authorities **continue to mass mobilize public sector employees, students and other residents for participation in various state-organized events**. In violation of the right to voluntary participation in assemblies, residents are made to attend such events at **the threat of reprisals for non-participation**, such as dismissal or the loss of benefits. According to TIHR’s information, when hired, employees at public institutions have even been required to sign agreements that they may be dismissed if they refuse to participate in “mass events aimed at glorifying the great achievements of the country and its leadership”.⁷³

While continuing to mobilize residents for state-organized mass events during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Turkmenistani authorities **failed to ensure that participants comply with protective measures** such as physical distancing and the use of masks, thereby exposing them to a heightened risk of contracting Covid-19. For example, public sector employees and students mobilized to participate in official celebrations held at the time of the pandemic were taken to the venue of the celebrations on overcrowded buses without wearing masks.⁷⁴ The authorities have also **jeopardized the health and well-being of residents, including children** by mobilizing them for participation in mass events in **challenging weather conditions**, such as in the following cases:

- On 29 June 2022, musical-cultural events were organized to mark the 65-year anniversary of former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. The celebrations went ahead as planned, although the weather was exceptionally hot, with temperatures over 45 degrees Celsius. State employees, people working for public organizations and students were required to attend the celebrations, which were primarily held outdoors in public parks, at the threat of repercussions.⁷⁵ According to TIHR’s information, in the capital Ashgabat – where the main celebrations were held, hundreds of people who attended or performed at the events organized in the ex-president’s honour required medical assistance, with some of them being hospitalized in a serious condition.⁷⁶

- According to TIHR's information, on 24 June 2021, residents of the city of Farab in Lebap region were mobilized to participate in the festive opening of an amusement park, which then President Gurnabguly Berdymukhamedov was expected to attend, although he eventually did not show up. The participants, dressed in national costumes were made to wait in the scorching sun for several hours before the start of the celebrations. They were not allowed to drink anything so as not to have to visit the toilet. A young girl lost consciousness due to the heat and was taken away by ambulance. The doctors attending to her at a local hospital reportedly warned her parents not to tell anyone about the incident.⁷⁷
- In another case reported by the Turkmen service of RFE/RL, school children and teachers were mobilized for an official event held in a park in the city of Mary on 31 May 2021 to celebrate the International Day for the Protection of Children. Despite the exceptionally hot weather (with the temperature exceeding 40 degrees Celsius), the participating children were made to wear national costumes and were not given any water to drink for several hours. A parent told Radio *Azatlyk's* correspondent that many children were crying because they were so thirsty.⁷⁸

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Safeguard the right of residents to freely assemble on issues of concern to them, including by holding peaceful spontaneous protests without facing repercussions.
- In accordance with the Committee's previous recommendations, ensure that participation in state-organized mass events is voluntary and that non-participation does not result in reprisals. As a matter of priority, stop forcibly mobilizing children for mass events.
- Take adequate measures to protect the health and well-being of participants in state-organized mass events such as by refraining from holding events during times of pandemics and in extreme weather conditions and by providing participants with adequate opportunities to drink, eat and rest.

5. Restrictions on the operation of NGOs and political parties (articles 22, 19, 25)

Turkmenistan's Law on Public Associations, which was adopted in May 2014, grants citizens the right to establish and join local, regional, national and international associations of their choice and prohibits state interference in the activities of associations. However, the law also provides for **excessive restrictions on the right to freedom of association**, in particular by requiring compulsory registration of associations, establishing strict registration rules and granting authorities wide powers to oversee the activities and finances of associations without adequate safeguards against abuse. There are also broad grounds on which associations may be closed down by court.

In practice, **the operating environment for public associations remain highly restrictive** and the authorities continue to **promote so-called GONGOs** (government-organized and supported organizations) instead of real NGOs. Among the largest public associations existing in the country are Soviet-era type of unions, such as youth

and women unions, and the activities of many organizations are related to sport, health, culture and other non-controversial areas of work. Some organizations provide support to people with disabilities, elderly people and other groups in need of assistance. However, while the authorities have reported that several new public associations have recently been granted registration (see point 122 of the government's responses to the List of Issues for the current review), as previously, **no truly independent NGOs working on human rights** or challenging the government's policies **are registered or able to work openly** in the country. Civil society representatives who dare to publicly speak out on the situation in the country are highly vulnerable to persecution (see more in the chapter on civil society).

Exile-based, independent Turkmenistani NGOs have also faced pressure. For example, the website of Austria-based TIHR is regularly the target of cyberattacks believed to originate from the Turkmenistani authorities, which in some cases have resulted in temporary disruptions to the site. In 2021, TIHR's YouTube channel was blocked following complaints filed by a government associated concerning alleged copyright violations. TIHR's director Farid Tukhbatullin and his family members, including those residing in Turkmenistan have repeatedly been subjected to intimidation. For example, in November 2021-January 2022 his mother, **Khalida Izbastinova**, received a series of intimidating visits by police in her home in the city of Dashoguz. TIHR and IPHR believe that these actions were aimed at intimidating Izbastinova because of her son's human rights activities and his criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities.⁷⁹ Most of TIHR's contributors inside Turkmenistan work clandestinely for security reasons, while those with a public profile such as journalist **Soltan Achilova** and civil society activist **Natalia Shabunts** have reported ongoing surveillance and intimidation. According to Achilova, security service officials have also questioned people whom she has interviewed and warned them that they may face problems if they communicate with her, claiming that she is associated with "subversive foreign organizations working against the state".⁸⁰

While it remains extremely challenging for civil society actors to carry out on-the-ground monitoring of the human rights situation, **international human rights monitors have continued to be denied access** to the country. In May 2018, the Turkmenistani government issued a standing invitation to UN special procedures to visit the country.⁸¹ However, although this was a welcome step, and there have been discussions with individual mandate holders on possible visits, the authorities have yet to finally agree to and facilitate new visits in practice.⁸² The requests from a number of UN special procedures to visit Turkmenistan are currently pending, with some of these requests initially having been made over a decade ago. To date, only the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to religion or belief has visited Turkmenistan – in 2008.

Turkmenistan's Law on Political Parties, adopted in January 2012, created a legal basis for a multi-party system. It grants citizens the right to establish and participate in the activities of political parties and sets out requirements for the registration and operation of parties. The law prohibits parties established on ethnic or religious grounds, regional parties, and parties "based on professional principle". It also **requires that the leadership and management bodies of parties are located in Turkmenistan**, which rules out the possibility of parties led by citizens based in exile. Political parties may be denied registration, inter alia, if their statutes are found to violate national legislation and existing parties may be suspended or closed down by court if their activities are deemed contrary to national legislation or their own charters or programmes.

Following the adoption of the Law on Political Parties, two more political parties were established aside from the pre-existing presidential Democratic Party of Turkmenistan: The Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs in 2012, and the Agrarian Party in 2014. The process of creating the two new parties was carried out under the auspices of the presidential administration and they **do not represent any independent platforms or genuine alternatives to the ruling party**. In its assessment of the March 2018 parliamentary elections, the OSCE Office

of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that while the political landscape is “nominally pluralist”, it “**lacks diversity of views**” as all three political parties “align themselves” with the president’s policies and “differ only in their professed support base”.⁸³ Following the orchestrated transfer of power from father to son in March 2022, there has been no change in the situation in this regard and thus, as previously, there is no space for alternative political views to be openly expressed and advocated in Turkmenistan, and political opposition groups can only function outside the country. Thus, there are no prospects for the new parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2023⁸⁴ to be free and fair either.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Bring the provisions of the Law on Public Associations concerning the registration, oversight and operation of such entities into full compliance with international human rights standards.
- Ensure that independent NGOs that so wish may obtain legal status in a fair and transparent process and carry out their activities without undue interference by authorities.
- Facilitate visits to the country of all UN special procedures who have requested to visit the country in accordance with their terms of reference and cooperate constructively with them during and in follow-up to the visits.
- Revise problematic provisions of the Law on Political Parties in accordance with the recommendations of international human rights experts.
- Enable independent political parties to obtain registration and operate freely and facilitate open public debate on political alternatives in the country.

6. Politically motivated imprisonment, torture, disappearances and harsh prison conditions (articles 14, 7, 9, 6, 10)

As previously, there is no effective separation of powers between different branches in Turkmenistan and the judiciary is heavily dependent on the executive. The **pattern of politically motivated prosecution and imprisonment continues**, as seen in a number of recent cases involving civil society members (see more in chapter 3). Trials in politically motivated cases are typically held behind closed doors, without access to a lawyer of their own choice for the defendants and in violation of other basic fair trial guarantees.

Given the closed nature of the country’s detention facilities, it is very difficult to obtain information about the problem of torture. However, available information, in particular reports from former detainees indicate that **torture and ill-treatment remain widespread**. Torture and ill-treatment are largely **perpetrated with impunity** due to the lack of effective measures to investigate allegations of such treatment and hold the perpetrators accountable, although torture is criminalized in the country. Torture and ill-treatment are believed to be frequently used in pre-trial detention facilities, with “confessions” obtained under duress routinely being used as the basis for guilty verdicts against defendants in criminal cases, but also in prisons, with individuals imprisoned on politically motivated grounds being especially vulnerable to prohibited treatment.⁸⁵ (For examples, see chapter 3).

The **lack of an independent and effective monitoring mechanism** of detention facilities remains a key problem. The national bodies that currently have a mandate to monitor conditions in places of detention, including supervisory commissions attached to the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ombudsperson's office (as described in par. 85 and 94 of the State Party's report) are not independent and, judging from the information provided by the government, only occasionally carry out visits to detention facilities. The authorities have **not allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to monitor the country's detention facilities** and although sporadic visits by foreign diplomats and representatives of international organizations to such facilities (as described in par. 96 of the State Party's report) are welcome, they cannot replace regular, unhindered independent monitoring.

There have also been **new reports about hazing and torture in the army**, and TIHR and other independent organizations have received information about several cases in which **soldiers have died under circumstances suggesting that this has been the result of abusive treatment** to which they have been subjected by army officials and fellow conscripts.⁸⁶ There have typically been no effective investigations into these cases.

The **practice of enforced disappearances continues** in Turkmenistan. While the government claims to have received no complaints about enforced disappearances (par. 77 of the State Party's report), independent civil society organizations have received information about dozens of such cases. The Prove They Are Alive NGO campaign has documented over 160 cases of enforced disappearances since the systematic use of this practice began following a reported assassination attempt on then President Saparmurat Niyazov in November 2002.⁸⁷ The victims of this practice include individuals convicted because of their alleged involvement in the assassination attempt, former state officials prosecuted after falling out of favour with the government, people charged with so-called Islamic extremism and civil society activists.⁸⁸ Some of the victims are known to subsequently have died, been released or granted contacts with their family, but over 90 cases of disappearances are ongoing.⁸⁹

There have also been reports about the **use of incommunicado detention in recent cases** of individuals detained in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms. For example, Khursanai Ismatullaeva was held incommunicado for two weeks following her detention in July 2021, with her relatives having no information about her whereabouts. (See more about her case in chapter 3).

While the material conditions within parts of Turkmenistan's prison system have improved as a result of the modernization efforts undertaken by the authorities in the past decade (as described in par. 90 of the State Party's report), **serious concerns remain about prison conditions**. As documented in a joint report published by TIHR and Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association (TILA),⁹⁰ major problems include overcrowding, poor sanitation, scant access to food and drinking water, widespread diseases such as tuberculosis, and lack of adequate medical assistance. Corrupt practices among prison staff also negatively affect the situation of prisoners.

Given the government's policy of denial in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic (see more in chapter 1), **no official information has been provided about the spread of Covid-19 in prisons**. However, exile-based NGOs have received information about cases of Covid-19 among prisoners and recently released prisoners.⁹¹ In the context of the pandemic, **new restrictions were enforced on prisoners' contacts with their relatives**, including meetings and receiving parcels with food and other necessities.⁹² While introduced for public health reasons, these measures further increased the vulnerability of prisoners. As previously, there are particular concerns about the treatment of prisoners held at the **notorious Ovadan Depe facility**, where conditions have been described as terrifying by previous prisoners.⁹³ Many individuals imprisoned on politically motivated grounds

have been taken to Ovadan Depe and this secretive facility is also believed to accommodate many of those who have disappeared within the prison system.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani government should be requested to:

- Take concrete measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and ensure that the judicial system is not used to hand down politically motivated sentences in trials held in violation of international due process and fair trial standards.
- Ensure that the Criminal Code provision on torture is applied in practice and that any allegations of torture and ill-treatment are promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated, the perpetrators prosecuted and given penalties commensurate to their crimes and the victims granted adequate compensation.
- Put an end to the practices of prolonged incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances, and undertake to investigate all cases involving alleged victims of these practices documented by independent NGOs and to provide information about the fate and whereabouts of those concerned and grant them access to their lawyers and family members.
- Establish an effective national system for effective and regular monitoring of all places of detention without prior notice and grant the ICRC unhindered access to detention facilities and enable it to carry out monitoring in accordance with its standard procedures.
- Ensure that prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners correspond to international standards.

7. The use of forced labour in the cotton harvest (article 8)

Based on first-hand information from sources on the ground, TIHR and Turkmen News have documented **continued, systematic and widespread use of forced labour in the cotton harvest** in Turkmenistan.⁹⁴

In a state-controlled system, **tens of thousands of public-sector workers are annually forced to pick cotton** across the country or to engage other people to pick cotton instead of them. The conditions in which people are forced to pick cotton are often hazardous and unsanitary, and there are concerns about lack of access to clean drinking water and adequate medical assistance for participants. Those mobilized are often required to work intensely, also during weekends and other days off.

As **women** make up a majority of those working in the public sector, they **are particularly vulnerable** to this practice. The use of forced labour in the cotton fields also has a **debilitating impact on the provision of education, health, and other basic public services** as teachers, doctors and other public employees spend time picking cotton instead of carrying out their regular work.

In some cases, **teenaged children have been documented participating in the cotton harvest** as replacements for their parents, or when sent to the fields by their schools.

While the authorities enforced Covid-19 preventive measures in other contexts, they failed to do so in relation to those participating in cotton harvest, thereby **exposing them to an increased risk of contracting the Coronavirus**. In particular, public-sector employees were taken to pick cotton on overcrowded buses without wearing masks, and access to hygiene facilities was not provided in the cotton fields.

In another ongoing practice, **public sector employees are required to pay a supposedly voluntary contribution** from their salaries to cover costs related to the cotton harvest and thereby ensure the “the successful implementation of the state plan” in this area. Such requirements **negatively affect the well-being of entire families** as many families are struggling to make ends meet amid the protracted economic crisis and rising food prices.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Enforce in practice national legislation banning the use of forced labour, in accordance with Turkmenistan’s international obligations.
- Take effective measures to put an end to the current state-controlled system for using forced labour in the cotton harvest.

8. Equality of rights between men and women, boys and girls (articles 3, 24)

Turkmenistan’s government has identified efforts to improve the status of women and promote true gender equality as a political priority.⁹⁵ However, **women currently remain one of the most vulnerable groups of the population**, whose rights are arbitrarily restricted contrary to the country’s obligations under the ICCPR.

Soon after President Serdar Berdymukhamedov took office in March 2022, reports emerged about **reinforced efforts by the authorities to promote so-called traditional values and standards** regarding women’s role and to **enforce restrictive requirements regarding women’s appearance and conduct**. There were, for example, reports about unofficial restrictions being enforced with respect to women’s clothing in public places, their use of make-up and beauty services, and their car rides.⁹⁶

Propaganda events were organised in state institutions, public organisations and educational establishments to “educate” women and girls on issues of morality and observance of national traditions and how they are expected to behave, dress and look. Those attending events were **threatened with repercussions**, including dismissal or expulsion if they fail to comply with requirements such as wearing national-style dresses and refraining from using heavy make-up.⁹⁷

There were reports about police raids on beauty salons, with owners being warned that they might face penalties if they provide services such as eyelash and nail extensions and lip augmentations.⁹⁸ Similarly,

there were reports of **women being checked by police, detained and fined** for having made use of such services.⁹⁹

In addition, state media have carried articles about the “rules of behaviour” of women that supposedly are determined by national traditions. For example, an article published in *Neutrnly Turkmenistan* in mid-October 2022 instructed women to demonstrate “reverent respect” for their husbands and to refrain from referring to them by their names.¹⁰⁰

The authorities’ current drive to promote so-called traditional and moral values is likely to further **strengthen entrenched negative and discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and girls**, in addition to resulting in arbitrary restrictions on their rights. It might also **aggravate problems of violence against women** by leaving perpetrators feeling vindicated and reinforcing patterns of victim blaming¹⁰¹, thereby making victims even more reluctant to report abuse.

It is welcome that the results of the first-ever national sample survey on the health and status of women in the family, which the government carried out with technical assistance of the UNFPA, were made public in August 2022.¹⁰² The survey, which drew on data from 3,500 households, found that 16 percent of all women surveyed had experienced at least some form of violence, including physical, psychological and sexual violence by their husbands or partners. It also found that women who experience domestic violence rarely reach out for help, with less than 12 percent of victims of partner violence turning to the police or other institutions. The results indicated that social pressure and the fear of “dishonouring the family” are key reasons why women typically remain silent about violence and refrain from seeking help and protection. In particular sexual violence, which survey respondents reported experiences of least frequently, is associated with a high level of social taboo and stigmatisation in Turkmenistan. Against this background, there is reason to believe that there is likely to have been underreporting of experiences of abuse among those surveyed and that violence against women in the family might be more widespread than the survey results show. It is imperative that the government **takes effective measures to implement the recommendations resulting from the survey findings** in order to prevent and ensure accountability for all types of violence against women.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Put an end to arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on women’s and girl’s rights and ensure that efforts to promote so-called traditional and moral values are consistent with national commitments and international human rights standards on women’s rights and gender equality.
- Take effective measures to implement the national action plan on promoting gender equality for the years 2021-2025, as well as the recommendations resulting from the recent national survey on the health and status of women in the family with a view to combating violence and discrimination against women.

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- ¹ See state media report from 21 January 2023: <https://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/ru/post/69346/sozdan-vyssshij-predstavitelnyj-organ-narodnoj-vlasti-halk-maslahaty-turkmenistana>; as well as reports by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and TIHR: <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/32237932.html>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/01/rehulk-maslahaty/>
- ² See more in TIHR report from 3 May 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/05/treating-symptoms/>
- ³ See more in TIHR reports from 4 May and 7 May 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/lebap-mayday/>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/arrests/>
- ⁴ The government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was examined in detail in a report published by IPHR and TIHR in July 2020: <https://www.iphronline.org/it-came-with-the-wind-turkmenistan-s-covid-19-response.html>
- ⁵ See <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/these-islands-are-24-hours-away-from-their-nearest-neighbour-it-finally-recorded-a-covid-case/bp5q47uqn>
- ⁶ More details can be found in IPHR-TIHR report from July 2020: <https://www.iphronline.org/it-came-with-the-wind-turkmenistan-s-covid-19-response.html>
- ⁷ Examples of such cases are documented in the following TIHR report from April 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/mobile/>; and the following Radio *Azatlyk* report from 5 March 2021: <https://www.azathabar.com/a/31135145.html>
- ⁸ For example, after more than 100 medical workers in Turkmenabat appealed to the regional authorities in July 2020 to provide hospitals with more means of personal protection, medicine and equipment, they were warned that the appeal was "contradictory to the president's policies" and that they might be held accountable. See TIHR report from 4 August 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/08/medics-demands/>
- ⁹ See more in IPHR-TIHR report from July 2020: <https://www.iphronline.org/it-came-with-the-wind-turkmenistan-s-covid-19-response.html>; and joint letter to the WHO by Turkmenistani human rights groups in exile from September 2021: <https://en.turkmen.news/news/open-letter-to-world-health-organization/>
- ¹⁰ The findings of the WHO mission are summarized in the following press release from 15 July 2020: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/07/1382091>
- ¹¹ BBC, "WHO casts doubt on Turkmenistan's zero-Covid claim", 8 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59168540>
- ¹² On 7 August 2020, WHO's Europe regional director reported that the Turkmenistani government had agreed to such an arrangement: https://twitter.com/hans_kluge/status/1291758100479967234?lang=en
- ¹³ See, for example, the following TIHR reports from 3 August 2020 and 21 July 2020: <https://en.hronikatm.com/2020/08/the-bodies-of-those-who-have-died-of-pneumonia-are-handed-over-in-plastic-bags-and-relatives-are-requested-to-bury-them-without-unpacking/>; <https://en.hronikatm.com/2020/07/at-least-8-to-12-people-die-of-pneumonia-in-ashgabat-on-a-daily-basis/>
- ¹⁴ Available in Russian at: http://base.spinform.ru/show_doc.fwx?rgn=57214
- ¹⁵ See <https://rsf.org/en/Turkmenistan>
- ¹⁶ See, for example, the following report from a government meeting in February 2021: <https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/ru/post/52315/prezident-turkmenistana-provyol-soveshchanie-po-sovershenstvovaniyu-sfery-kulturny-i-smi>
- ¹⁷ See Point 46, in the first part of section II in the National Human Rights Action Plan for 2016-2020.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.cable.co.uk/broadband/speed/worldwide-speed-league/>
- ²⁰ The costs are 100 manat (approx. 26 EUR)/month for city residents and 50 manat (approx. 13 EUR)/month for rural residents (see <https://telecom.tm/ru/internet>), compared to a minimum monthly salary of 1050 manat in 2022 (<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/40357/v-turkmenistane-povyssili-minimalnyi-razmer-oplaty-truda>).
- ²¹ See <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-turkmenistan>
- ²² The report is available at: <https://www.qurium.org/alerts/turkmenistan/turkmenistan-and-their-golden-dpi/>
- ²³ See <https://turkmen.news/v-turkmenistane-zablokirovali-tret-suschestvuyuschih-ip-adresov/>
- ²⁴ For examples, see the following IPHR-TIHR updates: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-new-repressive-measures-after-january-2022-events-in-kazakhstan-ahead-of-presidential-elections.html>; https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-dec_20_mar_21.html
- ²⁵ For a recent example, see TIHR report from 20 September 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/09/students-phone-checks/>
- ²⁶ TIHR report from 19 September 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/09/2022-09-17-kabmin/>
- ²⁷ As reported by state media: <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/33943/sozdana-rabochaya-komissiya-po-razrabotke-koncepcii-formirovaniya-nacionalnoj-cifrovoy-seti>
- ²⁸ See, for example, Radio *Azatlyk* report from 28 June 2018: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29325746.html>
- ²⁹ See more in TIHR report from 2 June 2017: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/06/iz-setki-veshaniya-iptv-v-turkmenistane-propal-ryad-rossijskih-kanalov/>
- ³⁰ For more information about this trend, see IPHR-TIHR report issued in June 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CLOSED-CIVIC-SPACE-IN-TURKMENISTAN-JUNE-2021-1.pdf>

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- ³¹ See more about her case in joint letter by six human rights groups issued in November 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ENG-open-letter-Hursanai-Ismatullaeva-23-Nov-2021.pdf>; and the following Turkmen News reports from 17 July 2021 and 16 November 2021: <https://turkmen.news/ismatullaeva-urgent/>, <https://turkmen.news/turkmen-doctor-seeks-justice/>
- ³² Turkmen News release from 28 July 2021: <https://turkmen.news/human-rights/ismatullaeva-faces-fraud-charge/>
- ³³ For example, in July 2022, several human rights NGOs and MEPs co-issued a statement on her case: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmen-doctor-anniversary-statement.html>
- ³⁴ Turkmen News and Radio Azatlyk reports from 3 January 2023, <https://turkmen.news/hursanaj-ismatullaeva-vyshla-na-svobodu/>, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/hursanay-ismatullayeva-is-free/32205160.html>
- ³⁵ See TIHR reports from 7 September 2020 and 30 September 2020 based on information from Memorial and the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF): <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/09/another-arrest/> and <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/09/6-year-sentence/>
- ³⁶ Joint statement issued by 10 human rights NGOs on 22 October 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/22/turkmenistan-drop-charges-free-wrongfully-imprisoned-lawyer>
- ³⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/A-HRC-WGAD-2022-18-TKM-AEV.pdf>
- ³⁸ See <https://tmhelsinki.org/article/c562b08a-2ac0-4731-aeaa-8c84ec87a127>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/12/allaberdyev-released/>
- ³⁹ For more information about his case, see IPHR-TIHR report issued in June 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CLOSED-CIVIC-SPACE-IN-TURKMENISTAN-JUNE-2021-1.pdf>
- ⁴⁰ See Turkmen News release from 13 February 2021: <https://turkmen.news/human-rights/predstavitel-obse-po-svobode-smi-navstreche-s-poslom-turkmenistana-zaprosila-informatsiyu-o-dele-nurgeldy-halykova/>
- ⁴¹ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "Journalist Nurgeldi Halykov jailed in Turkmenistan since September 2020 on fraud charges", 21 May 2021, at <https://cpj.org/2021/05/journalist-nurgeldi-halykov-jailed-in-turkmenistan-since-september-2020-on-fraud-charges/>
- ⁴² See joint NGO statement issued in September 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmen-authorities-should-immediately-release-unjustly-imprisoned-reporter-joint-statement-on-nurgeldi-halykov.html>
- ⁴³ See communication from UN special mandates to Turkmenistan's government dated 17 February 2021: <https://turkmen.news/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Communication-to-Turkmenistan.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ See joint NGO statement issued on 15 September 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmen-authorities-should-immediately-release-unjustly-imprisoned-reporter-joint-statement-on-nurgeldi-halykov.html>
- ⁴⁵ For a more detailed description of this case, see IPHR-TIHR update from October 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-s-government-targets-critics-at-home-and-abroad-in-its-relentless-crackdown-on-dissent.html>
- ⁴⁶ Radio *Azatlyk* article published on 26 June 2021: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31327487.html>
- ⁴⁷ TIHR news release from 18 August 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/08/four-years-in-prison/>
- ⁴⁸ Turkmen News report from 22 July 2021: <https://turkmen.news/human-rights/dushemov-facing-jail/>
- ⁴⁹ For additional background information on his case, see Amnesty International Urgent Action from 13 June 2014: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur610042014en.pdf>
- ⁵⁰ See Turkmen News article from 4 October 2021: <https://turkmen.news/banner/mingelov-prison-health/>
- ⁵¹ See Amnesty International, "Release critically ill human rights defender: Mansur Mingelov", 12 July 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR6187832018ENGLISH.pdf>
- ⁵² See more in the following report by the Prove They Are Alive Campaign: https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/List-of-the-Disappeared-in-Turkmen-Prisons_Sept-2019_ENG.pdf (page 7)
- ⁵³ See more on his case in the following TIHR article: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/05/6-years-for-interview/>; and the following TIHR-IPHR statement: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-new-president-should-end-persecution-imprisonment-of-critical-voices.html>
- ⁵⁴ See TIHR update from 25 November 2022, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/11/agajuma-bayramov-pasport/>
- ⁵⁵ TIHR update from 3 January 2023, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/01/bayramov-son-visit/>
- ⁵⁶ The list is available at: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/02/25-activists-list/>
- ⁵⁷ TIHR report from 1 April 2022, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/activist-released/>
- ⁵⁸ TIHR report from 29 September 2021, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/09/taganova-released/>
- ⁵⁹ See TIHR-IPHR report from June 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CLOSED-CIVIC-SPACE-IN-TURKMENISTAN-JUNE-2021-1.pdf>
- ⁶⁰ THF report from 18 August 2022, <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/ae8c6424-42f7-4985-b34a-5280cb601cb4>
- ⁶¹ TIHR reports from 3 August 2021 and 5 August 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/08/protestors-arrested/>, and <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/08/tk-internal-affairs/>
- ⁶² See Memorial news release from 3 September 2021: https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/v-aeroportu-stambula-zaderzhali-priletevshego-iz-francii-rukovoditelya-oppozitsionnogo

⁶³ See more in YouTube report published on 1 August 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nhpp27hpDmg&ab_channel=MuradKurbanov

⁶⁴ For more information, see IPHR-TIHR update from October 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-s-government-targets-critics-at-home-and-abroad-in-its-relentless-crackdown-on-dissent.html>

⁶⁵ For more information on this incident, see TIHR report from 16 August 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/08/interview/>

⁶⁶ TIHR report from 10 August 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/08/dursoltan/>

⁶⁷ See joint statement by human rights defenders from 23 July 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/prekratit-presledovaniya-turkmenskih-grazhdanskih-aktivistov/>

⁶⁸ For examples, see TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee head of its adoption of a list of issues on Turkmenistan: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-on-Turkmenistan-December-2021.pdf> and briefing paper from November 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IPHR-TIHR-briefing-paper-on-Turkmenistan-November-2022.pdf>

⁶⁹ Available (in Russian) at: https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/9597/file/TURKM_on%20feedom%20of%20assembly_ru.pdf

⁷⁰ Radio *Azatlyk* report from 13 January 2022, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31652255.html>

⁷¹ TIHR report from 10 May 2020: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/spontaneous-protest/>

⁷² TIHR reports from 6 February 2019 and 10 January 2019: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/02/roditelyam-studentov-napisavshim-kollektivnyu-zhalobu-na-western-union-pozvolili-perevesti-dopolnitelnye-summy/>, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/01/zhiteli-turkmenistana-stali-vyirazhat-nedovolstvo-v-svyazi-s-vvedennyimi-ogranicheniyami-po-perevodam-deneg-za-rubezh/>

⁷³ TIHR report from 19 October 2019: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/10/pay-to-work/>

⁷⁴ TIHR report from 22 March 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/03/nowruz-festivities/>

⁷⁵ Radio *Azatlyk* report from 30 June 2022: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31922705.html>

⁷⁶ TIHR report from 1 July 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/07/show-must-go-on-3/>

⁷⁷ TIHR report from 28 June 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/06/inappropriately-dressed/>

⁷⁸ Radio *Azatlyk* report from 2 June 2021: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31285959.html>

⁷⁹ See more in IPHR-TIHR briefing paper from November 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IPHR-TIHR-briefing-paper-on-Turkmenistan-November-2022.pdf>

⁸⁰ See TIHR report from 4 April 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/achilova-surveillance/>

⁸¹ According to information available at: <https://spinternet.ohchr.org/StandingInvitations.aspx?lang=en>

⁸² For more information on this issue, see joint TIHR-IPHR letter from February 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ENG-Final-joint-letter-on-Turkmenistan-Febr-2021.pdf>

⁸³ Final report by OSCE ODIHR election assessment mission on parliamentary elections held on 25 March 2018: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/8/382915_0.pdf

⁸⁴ <https://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/articles/46672.html>

⁸⁵ TIHR-TILA report, *Turkmenistan's penitentiary system*, December 2017, available in Russian at: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/12/penitentsiarnyie-uchrezhdeniya-turkmenistana-doklad-tipch/>

⁸⁶ For example, according to TIHR's information, in September 2019, four conscript soldiers allegedly died as a result of hazing at a military unit in Lepab region. The mother of one of them organized for an autopsy, which showed that her son died due to a head injury and had numerous traces of beatings on his body. In another case reported by Turkmen News, a soldier died in December 2019 after a month's service in Mary region. The official reason for his death was meningitis of unknown origin, but his relatives did not believe this version as he was hospitalized with signs of having been severely beaten. See TIHR report from 17 September 2019: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/09/army-hazing-2/>; and Turkmen News report from 26 May 2020: <https://turkmen.news/turkmenskaya-armiya-ubivaet/>. Additional examples of deaths in the army can be found in the following TIHR reports from 8 July 2020 and 29 August 2019: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/army-hazing-3/>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/08/army-hazing/>

⁸⁷ See statement by Prove They Are Alive, November 2022: <https://provetheyarealive.org/twenty-years-since-the-beginning-of-mass-repression/>

⁸⁸ Prove They Are Alive, "List of the Disappeared in Turkmenistan's Prisons", November 2021: https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Disappeared-in-Turkmenistans-prisons_report_Prove_November-2021_final.pdf

⁸⁹ See statement by Prove They Are Alive, November 2022: <https://provetheyarealive.org/twenty-years-since-the-beginning-of-mass-repression/>

⁹⁰ TIHR-TILA report, *Turkmenistan's Penitentiary System*, December 2017, available in Russian at: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/12/penitentsiarnyie-uchrezhdeniya-turkmenistana-doklad-tipch/>

⁹¹ See, for example, TIHR report from 30 September 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/09/pardoned-covid/>

⁹² See more on these restrictions in report by Memorial and THF from 15 February 2021: https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/politzaklyuchyonnyh-v-turkmenistane-ogranichivayut-v-kontaktah-s-rodstvennikami/; TIHR report from 26 July 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/07/no-visits/>; and Turkmen News report from 27 August 2021: <https://turkmen.news/turkmenistan-itk-peredachi/>

⁹³ See TIHR-TILA report from December 2017: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/12/penitentsiarnyie-uchrezhdeniya-turkmenistana-doklad-tipch/>; and also Prove They Are Alive Report, *Turkmenistan's Prison System and Political Prisoners*, February 2020: https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TKM-prison-system_briefing-paper_Prove-campaign_Feb-2020.pdf

⁹⁴ The information in this chapter is based on the following reports on the use of forced labour in the cotton harvests in 2020 and 2021 researched and drafted by Turkmen News and TIHR, in cooperation with the Cotton Campaign: https://en.turkmen.news/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/TURKMENISTAN_COTTON_2020_WEB_ENG.pdf; and https://static1.squarespace.com/static/618550501fe9be0ff3428860/t/62de40eed701ff144dd891c4/1658732787144/CC_TKM_2021_HARVEST_REPORT.pdf

⁹⁵ See, for example, <https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/ru/post/63208/v-ashhabade-sostoyalos-zasedanie-dialoga-zhenshchin-gosudarstv-centralnoj-azii-i-rossii>

⁹⁶ Current Time report from 12 September 2022, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/turkmenistan-asia-women-rights/32028786.html>

⁹⁷ TIHR and Radio *Azatlyk* reports from 26 April 2022, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/women-morality/>, and <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31821279.html>

⁹⁸ Radio *Azatlyk* report from 6 May 2022, at <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/turkmenistan-puts-severe-restrictions-on-women-s-appearances-and-ability-to-travel/31837016.html>

⁹⁹ Current Time report from 12 September 2022, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/turkmenistan-asia-women-rights/32028786.html>

¹⁰⁰ TIHR report from 13 October 2022, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/10/national-traditions/>

¹⁰¹ TIHR report from 18 May 2022, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/05/police-victim-blaming/>

¹⁰² See: <https://turkmenistan.unfpa.org/en/news/turkmenistan-releases-first-ever-national-survey-health-and-status-woman-family>