



Enforced Disappearances in Turkmen Prisons Must Be Stopped

Statement by the "Prove They Are Alive!" Campaign on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

30 August 2016

On this International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign reaffirms its solidarity with all victims of disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons and their families, urges the Turkmen authorities to immediately end this gross violation of human rights, and calls on the international community to make the ending of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons a key condition for development of cooperation with the Turkmen government and firmly demand that Turkmenistan implement international legal norms and its obligations in the framework of international organisations.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign expresses its extreme concern over credible information about a series of recent deaths among prisoners previously considered disappeared in Turkmen prisons. This includes the deaths of three disappeared inmates, whose bodies were released by Turkmen authorities to their families for burial over the past nine months. All of them had been imprisoned for more than ten years in complete isolation from the outside world. According to eyewitnesses, the prisoners' bodies showed extreme signs of starvation. The rare occasions when the bodies of disappeared prison inmates are released to families for burial are in fact the only type of official information available about their fate.

These outrageous facts provide evidence that these people were alive until very recently, but for many years until the very last moment, the authorities have not disclosed information about their condition and whereabouts.

According to NGO estimates, more than a hundred people have disappeared in Turkmenistan's prison system over the past 15 years. Considered a threat by the authorities, they have been held in total isolation, so that from the moment of their arrest and trial, no one, including relatives, lawyers, or representatives of international organisations, has had any information of their whereabouts, state of health, or even whether they are alive. Many of these people have been held incommunicado for more than 13 years. The Turkmen government has made them victims of enforced disappearances, subjecting their families to the torture of uncertainty and thus grossly violating the country's obligations under international and domestic law. The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has documented 87 cases of disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons and continues to collect data on other cases.¹

¹ <http://provetheyarealive.org/the-disappeared/>

Nevertheless, the Turkmen authorities continue to deny the fact that people have disappeared in the country's prisons and prevent any investigation of such cases. International humanitarian organisations are denied access to prisoners whose names are on the lists of the disappeared. Relatives of the victims of disappearances are subjected to systematic pressure in an attempt to conceal any information about the disappeared, they have been prohibited from leaving the country, and have faced threats.

The above facts demand that serious attention be paid to the nature of state power in Turkmenistan, which is based on total intimidation and isolation of Turkmen society from the outside world. The very existence of a category of prisoners who have disappeared and the ease with which any individual can fall into this category is a source of fear and is an insurmountable obstacle to democratic change, public initiative, and freedom of speech and belief.

In spite of sustained pressure from the international community over the past two years, the Turkmen authorities have failed to disclose information about the disappeared to their families, Turkmen society, and the international community, have not implemented relevant decisions by inter-governmental bodies, and have avoided taking any significant steps to end this gross violation of human rights.

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign again directs international attention to the fact that Turkmenistan remains one of the few countries with a large number of enforced disappearances during peacetime. Because all of these people have disappeared in prisons, the Turkmen authorities are directly and fully responsible for their lives and health.

We urge the Turkmen authorities to end this shameful practice, to promptly disclose all information about all prisoners, including those on the lists of disappearances compiled by non-governmental organisations, to inform families and the public about whether each disappeared person is alive, and in case of deaths, to release their bodies for burial.

We urge the international community and intergovernmental organisations, particularly the UN, the OSCE, and the EU, to make the ending of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons a key condition for development of cooperation with the Turkmen government and firmly demand that Turkmenistan implement international legal norms and its obligations within the framework of these organisations.

On this International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign reaffirms its solidarity with all victims of disappearances, their families, and friends.

The international human rights campaign "Prove They Are Alive!" has been working since 2013 with the goal of eradicating enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons. The campaign members include non-governmental organizations Crude Accountability (USA), Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia), Analytical Center Freedom Files (Russia), Human Rights Center "Memorial" (Russia), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, international NGO Human Rights Watch and Turkmen civic activists. The campaign acts with the support of the international Civic Solidarity Platform and actively interacts with a broad range of human rights defenders, experts, and inter-governmental organisations, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations, and the European Union. For additional information, please see the campaign's website <http://provetheyarealive.org>.