

news”, “harming the prestige of the State”, and having “illegal links with people residing in an enemy country”. The British Embassy and our EU partners will continue to monitor the situation of Mr al-Maleh and Mr al-Hasani and continue to press the Syrians for their release.

Freedom of Expression

The Syrian government monitors internet use closely. Internet cafés are a focus of the Syrian security services, which act to catch people who blog against the government. In 2009, three Syrian bloggers were imprisoned for writing anti-government statements. Websites, such as Facebook and YouTube, are blocked. The Ministry of Information closes media organisations that are critical. In June, the Ministry banned the distribution of youth magazine *Shabbalek* and the Lebanese newspaper *Al Ahkbar Daily* and in September, the Syrian security authorities closed the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression.

Rights of Kurds

Syria’s estimated 1.7 million Kurds continue to suffer from discrimination, lack of political representation, and tight restrictions on social and cultural expression. In particular, there are a number of measures in place repressing Kurdish identity, through restricting the use of the Kurdish language in public, in schools and in the workplace. Kurdish-language publications are banned and celebrations of Kurdish festivities, such as Nowruz, the traditional Kurdish New Year, are prohibited.

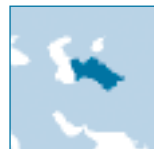
In addition, as many as 300,000 Kurds continue to be denied recognised citizenship. Presidential Decree 49, which was passed in October 2008, still remains in force. This questions the rights of Syrian citizens to hold property rights in the border areas of the country and particularly affects the Kurdish population. Kurds in Syria claim that it effectively prohibits them from selling, buying or inheriting land.

At least 150 Kurds were detained as political prisoners in 2009. In February, 26 Kurds were arrested during a ten-minute silent demonstration in Qamishli. On 20 March, six people were arrested in Hassake during Kurdish New Year celebrations, including Suleiman Osso, a leader of the Yekiti Party, which represents Kurdish interests. Three others were arrested in nearby Kurdish villages. On the same day, in the northeast of Syria, the police used a bulldozer to break the main stages at the celebrations in five towns and villages. Security services also arrested over 120 Kurds in

Aleppo and were reportedly physically and verbally abusive to Kurdish women during a candlelit New Year party.

On 23 November, Kurdish conscript Sadik Hossein Mousa was reported to have died during military service. Nineteen such cases have been reported in the last five years: six deaths of Kurdish conscripts in 2004; one in 2006; eight in 2008; and four in 2009. The Syrian authorities say the deaths are suicides, but human rights defenders say autopsy evidence points to death by torture or shooting that could not have been self-inflicted.

Turkmenistan



In 2009, there were indications that Turkmenistan was backtracking on previous improvements and commitments to human rights. The Turkmen government continues to state that it is ready for dialogue with the international community but this is not matched by concrete action. In areas such as freedom of expression, the rule of law, and the treatment of political prisoners, the evidence is either of inaction or further retrograde steps.

The slow pace of change is exacerbated by the lack of representative government. Although Parliament was increased from 65 to 125 members in December 2008, this has not resulted in any increase in transparency or democratic political process, and there remains no real move towards introducing a parliamentary political opposition.

The UN system, the EU and individual EU Member States continue to offer support to the Turkmen authorities as they seek to fulfil their human rights commitments. A third EU–Turkmenistan Enhanced Human Rights Dialogue took place in Brussels in June. For the second time the Turkmen side accepted a list of individual human rights cases and agreed to respond in writing. Disappointingly, the Turkmen government has yet to deliver a full response or fully comply with the recommendations it accepted in the course of its UPR in December 2008.

In our contacts with the Turkmen authorities, the UK continues to encourage respect for human rights as an integral part of stable and prosperous development and integration with the international economy. Through our Embassy in Ashgabat, we



Turkmen senior prison officials making a familiarisation visit to a juvenile centre in Kazakhstan. The visit was organized and funded by an FCO Penal Reform project in Turkmenistan.

provided a targeted programme of support to the relevant government agencies as well as the very few non-governmental bodies operating in Turkmenistan. This includes work with the Turkmen government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, which has allowed us to share UK experience of drafting human rights legislation, working with UN Special Rapporteurs and ombudsmen systems and other aspects of compliance with our international obligations.

Freedom of Expression

During 2009 there has been no improvement in respect of freedom of expression or freedom of association. Turkmenistan is classified by Reporters without Borders as one of 12 countries that is an enemy of the internet. All media is tightly controlled, with no independent newspapers or television or radio stations. News coverage consists primarily of a chronicle of official events with no independent editorial comment. Journalists who cooperate with foreign media have been subject to harassment and arbitrary detention. Working with the National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, the British Embassy has provided advice on the reform of legislation regulating media activity and has sponsored workshops on media regulation with experts from the BBC World Service Trust, Oxford University and other bodies.

Civil Society

There is still great suspicion of NGOs, particularly those working on human rights issues. International NGOs find it impossible to obtain visas. No truly independent NGO has successfully registered in the last four years.

Registration is a pre-requisite for an NGO to operate in Turkmenistan. The government has shown no signs of changing this requirement in the near future.

We are also concerned that Médecins Sans Frontières closed down its operations in mid-December after more than ten years, as they have not managed to secure any suitable agreements from the government to continue operations. A Médecins Sans Frontières administrator will remain in Turkmenistan until the current agreement ends in June 2010 in the hope that the Turkmen authorities might reconsider.

The British Embassy will continue to support the small group of surviving NGOs. With the Soros Central Eurasia

Project and the International NGO Training and Research Centre we are working to establish a local NGO training centre.

In 2009, the Turkmen government backtracked on its support for international scholarships when it placed a near total ban on all students trying to study overseas, by introducing new requirements to obtain special permissions from the education and migration ministries. The British Embassy, as local EU Presidency, was active in raising EU concerns with the government. This requirement was eased in late summer. However, there remains a total ban on any students trying to study at the American University in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Freedom of Religion

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, visited Turkmenistan in September 2008. Her report contained a number of recommendations, which, more than 18 months later, have yet to be fully implemented.

A number of religious groups continued to be refused registration in 2009. This includes Jehovah's Witnesses who have had their requests for registration turned down on many occasions. They have also had their meetings disrupted by law-enforcement agencies claiming to be looking for drugs. Turkmenistan has also backtracked on a commitment to investigate alternatives to military service for Jehovah's Witness followers. Registered religious groups are able to practise their beliefs discreetly, but there continues to be a ban on the importation of religious literature.

Discrimination

There is some discrimination against ethnic minorities in Turkmenistan. This generally takes the form of ethnic Turkmen being the favoured candidates for public-sector positions. Minorities are also excluded in new laws and public decisions. There are worrying signs that incidents of discrimination are on the increase, particularly with regard to ethnic Russians.

When jobs are advertised the wording makes it clear that the successful applicant will be a Turkmen national. Although ethnic Russians may hold Turkmen passports, for the purposes of employment they are not deemed to be Turkmen nationals and are not considered, even though there is nothing to prevent them from applying. Some new laws just stipulate "Turkmen", which can exclude any other ethnic minority regardless of whether they hold a Turkmen passport.

Political Prisoners

There were some welcome presidential pardons immediately after President Berdimuhamedov took office in 2007. But since then, there have been very few pardons for political prisoners.

It is disappointing that Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, a former political dissident, remains in prison after his return to Turkmenistan from Norway where he was given refugee status. His current whereabouts are unknown. After much lobbying by the international community, including by the British Embassy as local EU Presidency, the case of the environmental activist, Andrey Zatoka, was reviewed and his five-year sentence was reduced on appeal to a fine. He was permitted to renounce his Turkmen citizenship and to leave for Russia in November.

The release of political prisoners was one of the UK recommendations at Turkmenistan's UPR in 2008. This was rejected by the Turkmen government. The actual number of political prisoners in Turkmenistan remains unknown.

Rule of Law

In 2009, the Turkmen President set up an inter-departmental commission to examine Turkmenistan's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). This has led the Turkmen government to agree to implement a project proposed by the British Embassy aimed at

updating and revising the penal code, to bring it into line with international standards, and reforming the criminal justice system. It is expected that the amended draft of the penal code will be submitted to Parliament for passing into law early in 2010.

An important aspect of the UK assistance provided in the development of the new penal code has been to ensure the proper observance of children's rights. There were welcome signals from the government in 2009 that a separate section on juveniles will be incorporated into the new penal code. This will ensure considerable improvement in detention conditions for minors, including better access to education, unlimited family visits, increased parcel allowance including food provisions, unlimited telephone calls to their families, and a greater focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Turkmenistan accepted the UK's recommendation at its UPR that it will work to improve access to justice and the independence of the judiciary. We provided support to back up these recommendations including a visit to assist the National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights. However, we continue to have serious concerns, particularly with regard to the implementation of child-labour laws, prison conditions and penal reform.

Prison conditions remain extremely worrying. The Turkmen government has still not granted the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to Turkmen prisons. We continued to press the case for ICRC access throughout 2009, sharing expertise on ICRC mandate implementation and bringing in prison experts from countries in the region where the ICRC already has access. The Embassy also arranged a series of visits to the UK by senior Turkmen prison-management officials to share UK experience in implementing human rights standards in prisons.

We also continued to develop links throughout 2009 with the Turkmen Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Liberties Protection. The Chairman of the Committee and another member visited the UK in November, to familiarise themselves with UK best practice in implementing human rights into international and domestic law. This visit gave rise to the suggestion that Turkmenistan's prison system should come under the control of the Ministry of Justice rather than the Ministry of Interior, as at present.

We will continue to monitor the progress in the Turkmen parliament of proposals for reforming the penitentiary and juvenile justice system, the mechanisms of judicial protection, improving legislation on religious organisations, and on media regulation.

Uzbekistan



While some positive steps have been observed in 2009, serious concerns remain about the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Little progress has been made towards implementing

the recommendations accepted by Uzbekistan at its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in December 2008.

In October, EU Member States took the unanimous decision not to renew the remaining sanctions on Uzbekistan, which had been imposed following the events in Andizhan in May 2005. This decision was made with a view to encouraging the Uzbek authorities to take further substantive steps to improve the rule of law and the human rights situation on the ground.

The EU remains ready to strengthen relations with Uzbekistan and help the Uzbek authorities improve the human rights situation. In this respect, we hope that agreement can be reached with the Uzbek authorities for the EU to open a full delegation office in Tashkent, to better drive forward increased engagement.

Freedom of Expression

Serious restrictions on freedom of expression remained in place in 2009. Although formal censorship was abolished in 2002, self-censorship and new laws continue to prevent criticism of the government. Internet service providers must use the state-controlled telecom operator, enabling the blocking of selected websites, including the BBC. Journalists have reported being beaten and detained, or otherwise harassed, by police or security services.

In July, Dilmurod Saidov, a journalist who had reported on alleged government agricultural abuses, was sentenced to 12½ years in prison on charges of extortion and forgery. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists' 2009 Prison Census Report, this took the number of imprisoned journalists in Uzbekistan to seven, the 6th highest in the survey.

Few international NGOs are able to operate in Uzbekistan because the authorities withhold accreditation to foreign NGO staff. Human Rights Watch (HRW) continues to operate without a full time representative in the country as the government has refused to grant accreditation to the organisation's previous three candidates, and banned the latest applicant from entering the country. In meetings with Uzbek officials the British Embassy has urged the Uzbek government to promote greater pluralism of views in the country, including through accreditation of an HRW representative.

Freedom of Religion

Legislation in Uzbekistan guarantees religious freedom, but the reality is different. The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations (1998) grants rights only to registered groups and bans proselytising. Registration is a complex and lengthy process, and officially registered "religious organisations" are subject to tight legal controls. All religious activity by unregistered groups is criminalised, leaving peaceful groups vulnerable to raids on their homes and meetings by the police and security services. They can also face interrogation, fines and even imprisonment. Many groups report having been denied registration on spurious grounds. Followers of Islam outside the state-sponsored version are also vulnerable to arrest for perceived extremism. We have a number of ongoing concerns:

- > Dimitri Shestakov, a Pentecostal pastor from Andizhan, is still in the Navoi labour camp, serving a four-year sentence on charges of organising an illegal religious group, inciting religious hatred and distributing extremist religious literature.
- > In November, Jens Gregersen, a Danish citizen, was reportedly deported from Uzbekistan for missionary work on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- > Forum 18 News Service reported that an unprecedented number of followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi, at least 47 as of July, have been imprisoned in 2009.
- > The Baha'i community in Uzbekistan has also reportedly experienced harassment, with meetings being raided by law-enforcement agencies and pressure allegedly put on members to renounce their faith.