

Turkmenistan

IHF FOCUS: freedom of expression; freedom of the media; peaceful assembly; torture, ill-treatment, and fair trial; conditions in prisons; religious intolerance and conscientious objection; freedom of movement; national and ethnic minorities.

Increasingly isolated from the rest of the world, Turkmenistan remained tightly controlled by President Saparmurat Niyazov.

During the year 2002, the president was officially declared “president for life.” At the same time, the personality cult around him grew even more out of proportion. His “spiritual guide” *Rukhnama* was vigorously promoted among the citizenry and he initiated such measures as giving the days and months new names according to his own choosing.¹

President Niyazov claimed that the country was experiencing a “golden age.” However, while the president and his aides lived well from the revenues generated by the country’s huge gas and oil resources, the vast majority of the population was driven into ever greater destitution and economic despair.²

Moreover, the president continued, systematically, to repress fundamental political and civil rights of his citizens and to stifle all diversity of thought in the country. During the year, there were some indications of a growing underground opposition to the regime as well as of increasing discontent with the president among government officials. Under the auspices of the IHF and the Russian Memorial Human Rights Centre, exiled dissidents, civil society activists, and human rights defenders gathered twice, once in Vienna and once in Moscow, to discuss ways to promote democratic reforms and human rights in Turkmenistan.

However, developments following an alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov in November seriously harmed the cause of those involved in efforts to push for democratic change in the country. The president used the alleged assassination attempt, which he claimed was masterminded by a group of former high-ranking government officials, as a pretext to launch a new campaign against opponents to the regime as well as against their relatives and friends. Within the framework of this campaign, large numbers of people were detained, tortured, and convicted to lengthy prison sentences in show trials reminiscent of the Soviet era. The campaign served to discredit and weaken the entire opposition.³

At the end of the year, ten OSCE states invoked the “Moscow Mechanism,” a rarely used process that was laid down at the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in 1991, in connection with the new wave of persecution in Turkmenistan. The IHF welcomed this initiative, and in early 2003 IHF representatives, together with a number of exiled Turkmen human rights and political activists, held informal discussions with the rapporteur appointed by the OSCE to investigate the situation in Turkmenistan.⁴

In March, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) considered the implementation of the corresponding convention in Turkmenistan on the basis of information from various governments and NGOs. The CERD expressed serious concerns

¹ See, for example, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Nyazik Ataeva (pseudonym), “Turkmenbashi Made President for Life,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No 137, August 13, 2002.

² International Crisis Group, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan’s Failing Dictatorship*, January 17, 2002, at <http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=871>

³ See, for example, comments by Bruce Pannier in *RFE/RL Turkmen Report* January 20, 2003.

⁴ In March 2003, the OSCE Rapporteur, Professor Emmanuel Decaux, presented a report based on his investigations. See, ODIHR, *OSCE Rapporteur’s Report on Turkmenistan*, by Prof. Emmanuel Decaux, 12 March 2003 (ODIHR GAL/15/03).

regarding “grave allegations of human rights violations in Turkmenistan, both in the civil and political, as well as social, economic and cultural domains.” Turkmenistan is the only country that has not submitted any report under any UN convention it has ratified.⁵

Freedom of Expression

In late 2001, former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov declared open opposition to President Niyazov.⁶ In the months following his defection, a number of other high-ranking government officials also left their positions and joined the ranks of the exiled political opposition. In response to this, the president ordered new repressive measures against suspected opponents within the country and initiated a purge among his officials.⁷

Under the pretext of the need to root out corruption and other forms of abuse of power, President Niyazov subsequently dismissed and detained scores of officials and had their property confiscated. This campaign was more far-reaching than previous purges that the president has carried out and left the government increasingly incompetent. For the first time, the president also targeted members of the National Security Committee (KNB), which has been considered one of the firmest supporters of his policies. Numerous high-level KNB officers were not only removed from their posts but also faced criminal charges for crimes such as murder, procuring, drug trafficking and embezzlement.⁸

The increasing domestic turmoil that President Niyazov’s crackdowns brought about prompted opponents to the regime to consider how to more actively press for reforms in the country. In order to further dialogue within the opposition, the IHF and the Memorial Human Rights Centre invited Turkmen dissidents, civil society representatives, and human rights activists from different countries to a meeting in Vienna in June. During this meeting, the first of its kind ever, the participants discussed ways to promote democracy and rule of law in Turkmenistan and adopted a set of joint recommendations to the international community.⁹ In early November a follow-up meeting was held near Moscow.¹⁰

At the end of the year, developments in Turkmenistan reached a climax as President Niyazov was subjected to an alleged assassination attempt. In the morning of November 25, the president’s motorcade apparently came under fire as he was on his way to the office. Reportedly, one person was injured, but the president was unharmed. The attack triggered different speculations about who was responsible. The government, however, quickly

⁵ *Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Turkmenistan*, March 2002.

⁶ See IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region: The Balkans, the Caucasus, Europe, Central Asia and North America, Report 2001 (Events of 2001)*, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?doc_id=94

⁷ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Nazik Ataeva (pseudonym), “Diplomatic Defection Sparks Turmoil,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 105, February 19, 2002.

⁸ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Ata Amanov and Ovez Muradov (pseudonyms), “Turkmenbashi Axes Popular Minister,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 140, August 23, 2002; Nazik Ataeva (pseudonym), “Niyazov’s ‘Generosity’ Knows No Bounds,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 129, July 10, 2002; Nazik Ataeva (pseudonym), “Turkmenbashi Purges Inner Circle,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 115, April 12, 2002; RFE/RL, “Ex-security Chief and Henchmen to Face Trial in Turkmenistan,” in *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, Volume 2, No. 18, May 9, 2002.

⁹ IHF, *For Human Rights and Civil Society in Turkmenistan*, June 10, 2002, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=987. See also *The Human Rights and Security Situation in Turkmenistan - Report on Meeting Organized by the IHF and Human Rights Center “Memorial” Moscow, Vienna June 8-10, 2002*, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?doc_id=989

¹⁰ IHF, *The Human Rights and Security Situation in Turkmenistan*, November 5, 2002, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=994

denounced the failed attempt as a “terrorist act” and accused leading members of the exiled political opposition of having plotted it.¹¹

In the aftermath of the incident, the authorities arrested people en masse, and abused and convicted many of them in grossly unfair proceedings. A great number of those who were detained were allegedly targeted solely because they were relatives or friends of those accused of plotting the assassination attempt (see also section on Torture, Ill-treatment, and Fair Trial). Other family members of exiled opponents were subjected to intense monitoring and harassment and were dismissed from their jobs and evicted from their homes.¹² In the wake of the alleged assassination attempt the president also reportedly introduced a decree allowing for the establishment of special, remotely located, settlements for people who have “lost faith [in government ideology] and deserve universal disapproval.” According to the president, this measure had been successfully applied during the Stalin era to “cleanse” society and he believed that it could serve this function just as well in today’s Turkmenistan.¹³

- In late August, Gulgeldi Annannyyazov, a leading Turkmen dissident, was arrested at the Moscow airport for attempting to enter the country illegally. Fearing further persecution in his home country, Annannyyazov had fled Turkmenistan, via Kazakhstan, to Russia with the intent of seeking political asylum there. However, the Russian authorities did not allow him to apply for asylum, but returned him to Kazakhstan. In 1995, Annannyyazov was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his involvement in a demonstration calling for democratic reforms in Turkmenistan. In response to an international campaign, he was released after serving three years of his sentence. However, he and his family reportedly remained under constant surveillance by the authorities. Following the deportation of Annannyyazov from Russia to Kazakhstan in August 2002, the Turkmen authorities requested that the Kazakh authorities extradite him. Initially the Kazakh authorities showed readiness to comply with this request. However, apparently as a result of strong international criticism, the Kazakh authorities eventually decided not to extradite him in early October 2002. As pointed out by the IHF and other human rights groups, Annannyyazov’s life and safety would have been seriously endangered if he had been returned to Turkmenistan.¹⁴ Following the decision by the Kazakh authorities to decline the extradition request, Annannyyazov was reportedly granted travel documents by the UNHCR and flown to Norway, where he was expected to be granted political asylum.¹⁵

¹¹ RFE/RL, “Whodunnit? Hunt for culprits following assassination attempt becomes more and more curious,” in *Central Asia Report*, Volume 2, No. 45, December 5, 2002; “Turkmenistan’s Niyazov crushes opposition movement,” *Eurasia Insight*, January 7, 2003.

¹² IHF, “‘Totalitarian’ Repression in Turkmenistan,” January 13, 2003, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=315; Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, IHF, International League for Human Rights, Memorial Human Rights Centre, “Turkmen leader should mark birthday by introducing rule of law,” February 18, 2003, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=328

¹³ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Arslan Atamanov (pseudonym), “Gulag Threat for Dissidents,” in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 175, January 15, 2003.

¹⁴ See IHF, Open Letter to Kasymzhomat, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan: “Deportation of Gulgeldi Annannyyazov to Turkmenistan would violate Kazakh obligations under UN Torture Convention,” September 5, 2002, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=932

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan: Turkmen Dissident in Grave Danger of Deportation,” September 13, 2002, at <http://hrw.org/press/2002/09/kazakh0913.htm>; Human Rights Watch, “Turkmen dissident granted safety in Norway,” October 1, 2002, at www.hrw.org/update/2002/10.html#6; RFE/RL, “Turkmen oppositionist declared political refugee,” in *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, Volume 2, No. 39, October 10, 2002.

- On December 23, security agents arrested Fahriddin Tukhbatullin, an environmental activist associated with the Dashoguz Ecological Club, in his hometown Dashauz in North-eastern Turkmenistan. He was transferred thereafter to the investigation isolator of the Ministry of National Security in Ashgabat.¹⁶ Tukhbatullin, who was one of the participants of the meeting organized by the IHF and the Memorial Human Rights Centre in November (see above), was reportedly accused of withholding information about plans to violently overthrow the government. It was alleged that such plans had been discussed at the November meeting, an allegation that the IHF dismissed as categorically untrue.¹⁷ In the weeks leading up to the November meeting, Tukhbatullin had been subjected to escalating harassment from the authorities. He had reportedly been summoned to the regional branch of the Ministry of National Security in Dashoguz, where he was told, “we cannot forbid you to take part in conferences like that, but I hope you know what that can lead to.”¹⁸ In a January 2003 letter to the general prosecutor of Turkmenistan, the IHF urged that Tukhbatullin be released, stressing that this measure would be a positive signal that peaceful civil society has a place in the country, and would be welcomed by the international community.¹⁹

Freedom of the Media²⁰

All Turkmen media remained controlled and funded by the state. The state enjoyed an absolute monopoly on printing facilities and the president personally appointed all editors of all newspapers and magazines. He also provided them with directions as to the editorial policy he wished and was careful to make clear that failure to comply would result in dismissal. As a result, the country’s newspapers and magazines were essentially propaganda tools for the government and differed from each other only in name and format.

The newspapers primarily featured presidential speeches and glorification of the president, while the remaining space was filled with harmless sunshine stories about national holidays, workplace heroes, and the like. As common people took only little interest in the newspapers published in the country, government officials were ordered to subscribe to them in order to keep them running. The availability of foreign newspapers and magazines was strictly limited, and the government exercised tight control over all subscriptions to such media sources. Mass confiscations of newspapers at the border were common.

The three state-owned television channels used about a tenth of their broadcasting time for news programs, which were completely based on government propaganda. The rest of the broadcasting time was primarily devoted to folk music performances honoring the president as well as to patriotic and ideological programs informing the public about the “wise policies” of the president and “the happy life of the Turkmen people.” Television

¹⁶ Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, IHF, the International League for Human Rights, and the Memorial Human Rights Centre, “Turkmenistan: Court Should Release Ecologist Farid Tukhbatullin,” March 3, 2003, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=343; IHF, “Farid Tukhbatullin, Turkmen Civil Society Activist, Arrested by Security Services,” December 24, 2002, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=996

¹⁷ See IHF, *Totalitarian Repression in Turkmenistan*, January 13, 2002.

¹⁸ Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, IHF, the International League for Human Rights, and the Memorial Human Rights Centre, “Turkmenistan: Court Should Release Ecologist Farid Tukhbatullin,” March 3, 2003.

¹⁹ IHF, “Letter to Ms. Atadzhanova, General Prosecutor of Turkmenistan,” January 31, 2002.

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, based on the OSCE Representative on Media, Freimut Duve, *The Media Situation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—Five Country Reports*, 2002; and International Crisis Group, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan’s Failing Dictatorship*, January 2003.

programs from Russia had been cut to a few hours per day and they were only shown after they had been carefully reviewed and heavily censored. Most of the Russian programs that were allowed to go on air amounted to children's programs and entertainment shows. A growing number of city residents installed satellite antennas in their homes, above all to receive programs from Russia. However, there were reports indicating that the president was planning to limit access to this source of information. Already in July, more stringent controls of cable television were introduced.²¹

The independent Radio Free Europe continued to broadcast in the country, but its staff members were reportedly subjected to increasing pressure from the authorities. Journalists who had fallen out of favor with the government also reportedly faced harassment, and those of them that had left the country were prohibited from obtaining entry visas to visit family members in the country.

The only internet provider was state-owned and strictly controlled. In addition, it charged unreasonably high prices for its services.

Peaceful Assembly

During the year, some demonstrations were reportedly organized at which citizens managed to express discontent with the state of affairs in the country without police interference. According to some analysts this trend showed that the country's law enforcement authorities were becoming increasingly frustrated with the president's policies and therefore more willing to tolerate protest acts. However, other analysts expressed doubts as to the spontaneity of many of the demonstrations that took place – in particular those held to protest corrupt KNB practices.²² Some protest marches were forcefully disbanded.

- On August 1, about 200 women reportedly gathered on the square opposite the presidential palace in Ashgabat. The women wanted to stage a demonstration to protest government's policies, which they maintained had driven their families into destitution and hopelessness. However, as the demonstration began, a large number of policemen and plainclothes officers ran out into the square. They encircled the women and forced them into buses that took them to an unknown place.²³

Torture, Ill-treatment, and Fair Trial

In the wake of the alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov, a wave of arrests was carried out: according to official information, 67 people had been arrested as of February 2003. However, it was believed that the true number was much higher. There were numerous reports indicating that detainees were subjected to ill-treatment and torture.²⁴

At least 59 people were subsequently put on trial in legal proceedings that seriously violated international due process standards. The trials were held behind closed doors and

²¹ *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, July 29, 2002.

²² RFE/RL, Zamira Eshanova, "Turkmenistan: Opposition Claims Wide Protests, but Independent Observers Remain Doubtful," in *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine - Turkmenistan*, August 15, 2002; Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: A Rare Act of Public Protest?," in *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine - Turkmenistan*, April 17, 2002.

²³ *RFE/RL Turkmen Report* August 2, 2002.

²⁴ IHF, "'Totalitarian' Repression in Turkmenistan," January 13, 2002. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, IHF, International League for Human Rights, Memorial Human Rights Centre, "Turkmen leader should mark birthday by introducing rule of law," February 18, 2003.

were typically completed within only a few days. The suspects were, from the onset of the proceedings, presumed guilty and were not allowed to have lawyers of their own choosing. Some of the government-appointed lawyers reportedly expressed disgust at the thought of defending their clients. Eight persons were sentenced to lifetime imprisonment, and the rest received prison terms ranging from 5 to 25 years of imprisonment. Many government members demanded that the death penalty be re-introduced and applied to those found guilty of involvement in the alleged assassination attempt.²⁵

In a number of cases the suspects were shown “confessing” their guilt in grand television spectacles, where they were vocally denounced by a live audience. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of Media, Freimut Duve, strongly condemned these broadcasts and noted: “These are the same methods that were used during the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s in the Soviet Union [...] The rhetoric used is often obscene and in most countries would be unprintable.” He also expressed strong disapproval of the explicitly racist language used by President Niyazov and other government representatives when lashing out against suspects.²⁶

- Immediately after the alleged assassination attempt President Niyazov identified former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, former Deputy Agriculture Minister, Saparmurat Yklymov, former Deputy Prime Minister Khudayberdy Orazov, and former Turkmen Ambassador to Turkey Nurmukhammet Khanamov as the primary suspects.²⁷ On December 29, the Supreme Court reportedly convicted Shikhmuradov, Orazov and Khanamov for plotting the assassination attempt and handed them the maximum sentence of 25 years in prison. The next day, however, the country’s highest legislative body increased the sentence to lifetime imprisonment.²⁸ Shikhmuradov was arrested in Ashgabad on December 25, and three days later he was shown to “confess” his involvement in the assassination attempt on television. During his speech, which clearly was dictated, he, *inter alia*, denounced the opposition movement as a group of “bandits” and described President Niyazov as “a gift to the Turkmen people.” Many observers noted that he was speaking in a slow and shaky voice, as if he was under the influence of drugs, and appeared to have been beaten.²⁹ Orazov and Khanamov were not present at the trial, but remained in exile in Russia.³⁰ The Turkmen authorities exercised pressure on the Russian authorities to extradite the two men, in response to which the IHF and other human rights organizations expressed serious concern.³¹ Yklymov, who enjoys political asylum in Sweden,³² was also reportedly convicted *in absentia* for his alleged role in the assassination attempt and given a life sentence.³³ In addition, relatives and friends of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ OSCE Press Release, “OSCE Media Representative Blasts ‘Stalinist’ Propaganda Methods on Turkmen TV,” January 16, 2003.

²⁷ RFE/RL, “More fall-out over Turkmen Assassination Plan,” in *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, Volume 2, No. 46, December 12, 2002.

²⁸ Amnesty International, Turkmenistan Appeal, December 6, 2002; *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, January 20, 2003.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Turkmenistan: Conviction of Opposition leader Condemned,” December 31, 2002; *RFE/RL Turkmen Report* January 20, 2003.

³⁰ RFE/RL, Antoine Blua, “Turkmenistan: Human Rights Officials Criticize Investigation Into Assassination Plot,” in *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine - Turkmenistan*, December 11, 2002; *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, January 20, 2003.

³¹ IHF, “‘Totalitarian’ Repression in Turkmenistan,” January 13, 2003.

³² ³² RFE/RL, Antoine Blua, “Turkmenistan: Human Rights Officials Criticize Investigation Into Assassination Plot,” in *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine - Turkmenistan*, December 11, 2002.

³³ *RFE/RL Newslines* January 15, 2003.

the four men reportedly faced harassment, and several family members were arrested and abused.³⁴

- On November 25, 31-year-old Esenaman Yklymov and 20-year-old Aili Yklymov, cousins of Saparmurat Yklymov, were arrested in Ashgabat. The older of the two men was a resident in Turkmenistan, the younger one was visiting the country to attend a relative's wedding. Esenaman was released on November 26, but was re-arrested on November 28. The two men were reportedly held in the basement of the KNB, where they were severely beaten. According to relatives, Esenaman lost hearing in one of his ears as a result of the abuse, and Aili's condition deteriorated to the point that he was no longer able to walk.³⁵
- On November 30, Davlatgeldi Annannyazov was detained in Ashgabat. He is the brother of the former political prisoner Gulgeldi Annannyazov, who fled the country in the summer of 2002 (see Freedom of Expression). KNB officers reportedly beat Annaniyazov and ridiculed him in front of his wife and children when arresting him. Following the arrest, he was brought to the facilities of the Interior Ministry, where he was subjected to new rounds of beatings and forced to denounce his brother. These denouncements were recorded, apparently for possibly use as "evidence" at a later stage.³⁶

Conditions in Prisons

Prison conditions remained extremely harsh. Inmates were reportedly served only minimal rations of food, were frequently subjected to physical abuse, and were forced to do hard labor. As a result, mortality rates were very high.³⁷

Serious overcrowding was a persistent problem and, like in previous years, the authorities made use of amnesties in an attempt to alleviate the problem. Thus, on December 1, about 8,000 prisoners were released under a general amnesty. All prisoners who were female, elderly, under age, in poor health, or who had been convicted of minor crimes were reportedly released. According to official information, the general amnesty cut the number of prisoners by about a half.³⁸

- On November 8, between 800 and 1,000 inmates escaped from the Tejen prison in southern Turkmenistan. Some inmates reportedly managed to seize a truck in the prison yard and used it to break through the prison wall at three points. This enabled scores of inmates to run off into freedom. It was believed that some political prisoners were among those who escaped. Only four inmates were reportedly recaptured. The

³⁴ Amnesty International, Turkmenistan appeal, December 6, 2002; RFE/RL, Antoine Blua, "Turkmenistan: Human Rights Officials Criticize Investigation Into Assassination Plot," in RFE/RL *Turkmenistan Weekday Report*, December 11, 2002; RFE/RL, "Relatives of RFE/RL Reporter Detained in Crackdown," in RFE/RL (*Uncivil Societies*, Volume 3, No. 50, December 11, 2002.

³⁵ Amnesty International, appeal on Turkmenistan, December 6, 2002; RFE/RL, Antoine Blua, "Turkmenistan: Human Rights Officials Criticize Investigation Into Assassination Plot," in RFE/RL *Turkmenistan Weekday Report*, December 11, 2002; "Relatives of RFE/RL Reporter Detained in Crackdown," in RFE/RL (*Uncivil Societies*, Volume 3, No. 50, December 11, 2002.

³⁶ Amnesty International, Turkmenistan Appeal, December 6, 2002.

³⁷ International Crisis Group, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, January 17, 2002; RFE/RL, Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: Hundreds of Prisoners Break Out of Jail," November 21, 2002. See also IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region: the Balkans, the Caucasus, Europe, Central Asia and North America, Report 2002 (Events of 2001)*.

³⁸ RFE/RL *Turkmen Report* December 2, 2002; RFE/RL, "Prisons to be emptied," in *Central Asia Report*, Volume 2, No. 31, August 15, 2002.

Tejen prison was reportedly badly overcrowded. According to some estimations it had been accommodating ten times the number of inmates it was constructed for.³⁹

Religious Intolerance and Conscientious Objection

In a pattern consistent from previous years, the authorities only allowed religious communities that were subordinated to the state-sanctioned Sunni Islam Board or to the Russian Orthodox Church to register. All other religious communities, including various Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Baha'i and Hare Krishna communities, were considered "illegal."

The authorities regularly dispersed prayer meetings held by members of unregistered communities and fined the participants. Members of unregistered communities also faced other forms of harassment, including arrests, verbal and physical abuse, and deportation for arbitrary reasons. As of the end of the year, a total of five Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly serving prison sentences on fabricated criminal charges, while one Jehovah's Witness was imprisoned for his refusal to carry out compulsory military service.⁴⁰

- On July 2, a district court in Ashgabad sentenced 20-year-old Nikolai Shekelov, a Jehovah's Witness, to 1 and a half years in prison under article 219 of the Criminal Code. This article prescribes punishment for those refusing to serve in the army, irrespective of their reasons for doing so. The judge disregarded Shekelov's request to be granted permission to perform alternative civilian service. Moreover, in gross violation of international fair trial standards, Shekelov was convicted a second time for the same "offense." He had already been sentenced to one year in prison in 2000 under the relevant article of the Criminal Code and had been released only after he had served his full sentence.⁴¹
- Kurban Zakirov, a 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness, remained imprisoned on apparently false charges of attacking a prison officer. Zakirov was initially convicted for refusing to perform military service and sentenced to one year's imprisonment in May 1999. When his prison term came to its end in May 2000 he was, as was the common practice, requested to swear an oath of loyalty to the president. However, he refused to do so because of his religious convictions. His refusal reportedly prompted a prison officer to pull off his shoulder strap and accuse Zakirov of attacking him. As a result, Zakirov was sentenced to eight years of imprisonment. This was the harshest sentence imposed on any religious prisoner in the country since 1999. At first Zakirov was held in a high-security camp in his hometown Turkmenabad, where he reportedly was sharing a cell designed for ten persons with 21 other men and was forced to sleep on a board half of his height. The prison guards also reportedly exercised constant pressure on Zakirov to renounce his faith. In early 2002, he was reportedly transferred to a closed prison with a stricter regime, which, *inter alia*, prohibited inmates from exercising outdoors.⁴²

³⁹ RFE/RL, Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: Hundreds of Prisoners Break Out of Jail," November 21, 2002.

⁴⁰ Keston Institute, Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Further Fines on Baptists," *Keston News Service*, January 23, 2002; Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Six Jehovah's Witnesses in Labour Camp," *Keston News Service*, January 23, 2002; and Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Mother Condemns Renewed Sentence for Jehovah's Witness," *Keston News Service*, July 24, 2002.

⁴¹ Keston Institute, Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Mother Condemns Renewed Sentence for Jehovah's Witness," *Keston News Service*, July 24, 2002.

⁴² Amnesty International, *Concerns in Europe January-June 2002*; Keston Institute, Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Six Jehovah's Witnesses in Labour Camp," *Keston News Service*, January 23, 2002;

Freedom of Movement

Exit visas were abolished as of January 1, but during the year a number of people were reportedly denied the right to leave the country for arbitrary reasons. The authorities had reportedly compiled a list of some 2,500 people who were not permitted to travel abroad.⁴³ In July, new rules were introduced for persons wishing to travel to the neighboring countries of Uzbekistan and Iran. These people had to state reasons for their visit, declare where they would stay, and pay a customs fee of €6. Officially, the measure was imposed to fight smuggling of drugs and gas.⁴⁴ In early 2003 President Niyazov issued a decree according to which everyone traveling abroad would again be requested to hold exit visas as of March 1, 2003.⁴⁵ Freedom of movement within the country also remained restricted.⁴⁶

Following the alleged assassination attempt against him, the president also initiated the establishment of a special committee to interrogate all foreigners arriving in the country. According to the president the task of this committee was to find out who was coming into the country, for how long, and for what reasons. In addition, the committee was supposed to track the visitors' past as well as where they were going and with whom they were meeting during their stay in Turkmenistan. In addition, foreign visitors were requested to obtain a special registration, which was believed to create another hurdle to entering the country, although it was already extremely difficult to be granted a visa. According to the Memorial Human Rights Centre, the new rules reflected the president's belief that all major threats to his regime originated from abroad. It also concluded that the rules were aimed at further isolating Turkmenistan from the rest of the world.⁴⁷

Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities were subjected to worsening discrimination, above all, in the field of education.⁴⁸ According to information made public by the Ministry of Education in August, all Russian schools in the country had been closed down, and the number of schools offering classes taught in Russian had been considerably reduced.⁴⁹ The president also called for the Russian faculty at the state university in Ashgabat to be abolished, arguing that it was unnecessary to have a separate faculty for a language that was the mother tongue of only a "tiny minority" of the population (approximately 7% of the citizens were ethnic Russians⁵⁰).⁵¹

Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Jehovah's Witness Serving Eight-year Sentence for his Faith," *Keston News Service*, February 20, 2001.

⁴³ *Human Rights Watch World Report 2003*, at www.hrw.org/wr2k3/europe14.html; *RFE/RL Newswire* July 7, 2002.

⁴⁴ *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, July 15, 2002.

⁴⁵ *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, February 21, 2003.

⁴⁶ *Human Rights Watch World Report 2003*

⁴⁷ RFE/RL, Zamira Eshanova, "Turkmenistan: Niyazov Cracks Down on Foreigners After Assassination Attempt," in *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine - Turkmenistan*, December 4, 2002.

⁴⁸ *Human Rights Watch World Report 2003: Turkmenistan*.

⁴⁹ *RFE/RL Turkmen Report*, September 2, 2002.

⁵⁰ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2002*, at www.freedomhouse.org/research/nattransit.htm

⁵¹ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Nyazik Ataeva, "Niazov Takes Students Back to 'Middle Ages'," in *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 117, April 26, 2002.