Policy Briefing

Asia Briefing N°60
Bishkek/Brussels, 12 February 2007

International Crisis Group
WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

Turkmenistan after Niyazov

I. OVERVIEW

The death of President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan from heart failure was announced on 21 December 2006. His two decades in power bequeathed ruined education and public health sectors, a record of human rights abuses, thousands of political prisoners and an economy under strain despite rich energy exports. While official results are not expected to be announced for several days, there is little doubt they will show that his interim successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, easily won the carefully choreographed presidential election on 11 February from which genuine regime opponents were excluded. The strategically important country is quiet for now, and Berdimuhammedov – partnered by the security strong man, Akmurat Rejepov – has promised limited reforms. It is unclear, however, whether the new team genuinely intends meaningful changes. The international community should avoid temptations to give them the benefit of the doubt but instead make it clear that serious trade and aid relationships and an end to Turkmenistan's isolation require its new leaders to take the first steps to reverse Niyazov's most egregious socio-economic policies and improve human rights.

International commentary often ridiculed the Niyazov personality cult but behind the gold and marble monuments was a grim reality. Niyazov's Turkmenistan was one of the world's most repressive and isolationist regimes. No opposition was tolerated, and the president's word was law. Regular purges of all levels of government kept potential challengers off balance.

Niyazov left a country on the verge of a grave humanitarian and socio-economic crisis. Funding for educational and medical institutions has been drastically cut. Foreign degrees have been declared invalid, and the study programs in schools and universities shortened, with ideology an ever-growing part of the curriculum. Access to health care has been increasingly limited. With most money from hydrocarbon exports disappearing into off-budget and offshore accounts controlled by Niyazov – the current status of which are unknown – the economy had come under increasing strain. Agriculture has been left in disarray. Little or no regard was ever given to the environmental sustainability of Niyazov's schemes. Citizens' rights were routinely violated. In a particularly egregious case in 2006, a 58-year-old journalist and human rights activist, Ogulsapar Muradova, was arrested, along with two colleagues, and apparently tortured to death. Street crime and drug abuse are increasingly obvious, especially outside the capital, Ashgabat.

After Niyazov's death, a group centring on Berdimuhammedov, the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Rejepov, chief of the Presidential Guard, took what appears to be an uncontested hold on power. Niyazov's son and daughter have been sidelined, the military is underfunded and poorly equipped in comparison to the security services, and the political opposition is mostly in exile. Challenges from local elites or radical Islamist groups are unlikely at present.

While five tame candidates were allowed to stand against Berdimuhammedov in the presidential election, his victory was always certain. No opposition candidates were permitted, and all official structures worked to ensure the outcome. During the campaign, Berdimuhammedov promised improved education, higher pensions and salaries, greater attention to agriculture and free internet access. There have been hints that other changes might be in the works, though there have also been reports of continuing human rights abuses, including a reported massacre of inmates at the Owadandepe political prison.

It is uncertain whether the promised reforms are more than election demagoguery. Nothing concrete has yet been done. It does seem, however, that Berdimuhammedov and his allies realise that Niyazov's course cannot be maintained. The international community should welcome and encourage the promises of reform and be ready to assist, provided the new government truly acts. In the meantime, it should:

- express concern over the undemocratic nature of Berdimuhammedov's assumption of power and condition improved relations and new assistance upon the implementation of such reforms;

- urge the new government to consider an amnesty for the political prisoners of the Niyazov era;
- track down and freeze Niyazov's overseas assets, releasing them only on the strict proviso that they be used to implement reforms; and
- maintain and where possible expand existing aid programs intended to improve educational opportunities for Turkmen citizens, as well as other measures aimed at improving their lives.

The new government of Turkmenistan will need to carry out numerous and extensive reforms, many of them radical and requiring considerable time, if it means to repair the damage the dead president did to his country. There are a number of immediate initiatives, however, which it could easily take without threatening its position and which would demonstrate its serious intent and show goodwill, to its own people and to the wider world from which Niyazov so isolated them. In particular, it should rapidly:

- abrogate the 2003 decree invalidating academic degrees earned abroad;
- give the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to places of detention in accordance with its mandate;
- review the convictions of Niyazov-era political detainees and allow them access to relatives and international observers and the right to appeal their convictions and sentences;
- end restrictions on travel abroad; and
- facilitate a full, independent and public accounting of the death in custody of Ogulsapar Muradova and the current whereabouts and condition of her colleagues, Annakurban Amankylychev and Sapardurdy Hajiyev, and of the reported massacre at Owadandepe.

II. THE NEW REGIME

Niyazov's death from heart failure was announced on 21 December 2006.[1] For years, there had been persistent rumours that he was in poor health; in October 2006, the president himself acknoweldged that he was too ill to fast during Ramadan. Niyazov always had access to the best Western health care, and his personal cardiologist, Dr Hans Meisner of Germany, had given him a clean bill of health publicly not long before his death.[2] While this has fuelled speculation in some quarters that Niyazov was murdered, there is no evidence to suggest that his death was anything but the natural consequence of chronic illness.

A. THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT

According to the constitution, the speaker of the parliament, the Mejlis, should have become acting president. Almost as soon as the death was announced, however, news came that the speaker, Öwezgeldi Atayev, had been fired, arrested and replaced by Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, the deputy chairperson of the Council of Ministers (Niyazov had been the chairperson) and the head of the funeral committee.[3] Berdimuhammedov was born in 1957 in the Gökdepe district of Ahal province. Trained as a dentist, he held a number of positions in the ministry of health until 1997, when he became minister. In 2001, he was promoted to the equivalent of deputy prime minister with responsibility for health, science and education, a position he held until Niyazov's death.

Having survived countless government shakeups and purges, Berdimuhammedov is one of Turkmenistan's longest surviving ministers and is believed to have built a powerful client network. He presided over Niyazov's devastating health and education "reforms", which caused him to be described by one Turkmen source as a "narrow-minded, fundamentalist" follower of Niyazov.[4] Nonetheless, it is unclear how great his role in those "reforms" were. Niyazov gave underlings little room for independent political action and

[1] For previous reporting on Turkmenistan under Niyazov, see Crisis Group Asia Report Nº85, *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy*, 4 November 2004, and Crisis Group Asia Report Nº44, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, 17 January 2003.

[2] "Turkmen media deny Niyazov's health has deteriorated", RFE/RL 24 October 2006, at http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/10/426ac277-cfa1-4ed8-bc98-a9cc443dbc91.html.

[3] In 1993, Turkmenistan began a transition from Cyrillic, in use since Soviet times, to a new alphabet based on the Latin script. However, the international media often uses Russian versions of personal and place names, resulting in a variety of spellings for the same place or person. This briefing follows current Turkmen usage to a certain extent, falling back on more "Russified" spellings for easy recognition and readability: thus, "Berdimuhammedov" instead of "Berdykmukhammedov", but "Niyazov", instead of "Nyýazow", the more "correct" Turkmen spelling. Similarly, "Turkmenbashi" is used when referring to Niyazov's preferred honourific but "Türkmenbashy" for the Caspian sea port city formerly known as Krasnovodsk.

[4] Crisis Group interview, June 2006.

brooked no dissent. Berdimuhammedov is also said to have close ties to Turkish businessmen.

Siding with Berdimuhammedov in his seizure of power was the chief of the Presidential Guard, Akmurat Rejepov. A career KGB agent during Soviet times, Rejepov, like Berdimuhammedov, remained in place for years despite Niyazov's many purges. He is described as having been unswervingly loyal to the late president, with whom he had a rare relationship of absolute trust.[5] He is also reported to have strong ties in other branches of the extensive state security structures;[6] many senior figures in the MNS and the interior ministry are said to be his protégés.[7] Rejepov apparently played a major role in suppressing the November 2002 coup attempt.[8]

A Turkmen source said: "Berdimuhammedov can provide the cash, and Rejepov can provide the guns. It's a perfect tandem".[9] Once Atayev, who by all accounts was not likely to pose a challenge to the Berdimuhammedov-Rejepov tandem, had been sidelined, the new ruling group moved to consolidate its position. The Halk Maslahaty (People's Council)[10] changed the election code, allowing the interim president to stand for election. The minimum age for presidential candidates was dropped from 50 to 40 – thereby allowing the 49-year-old Berdimuhammedov to stand. Requirements that presidential candidates speak fluent Turkmen and have lived in the country for fifteen years were kept, thus precluding both Niyazov's son and daughter and the Turkmen opposition abroad.

The Halk Maslahaty also amended the constitution to give the Security Council, which coordinates state security, law-enforcement and the military organs, the rights to convene that body if the president is unable and to authorise the deputy chair of the Cabinet of Ministers (Berdimuhammedov's position) to serve as interim president in the event of the president's death.[11]

B. OTHER POTENTIAL ACTORS

Berdimuhammedov and Rejepov seem to be largely unchallenged. Nonetheless, future challenges cannot be ruled out, especially as the shock of Niyazov's death wears off and if the "tandem" shows any signs of internal strains.

1. The family

The Niyazov family seems unlikely at this point to pose a challenge. Niyazov's son, Murat, lives in Belgium as a businessman who brokers Turkmen gas deals and enjoys tax-free access to Turkmenistan's markets, such as the tobacco trade.[12] His reported playboy lifestyle, long absences and supposed inability to speak Turkmen limits his potential as a future contender for power. He also seemed to enjoy little support from his father; it is alleged Niyazov once exiled him.[13] However, on 1 July 2006, Murat represented Turkmenistan in a meeting with officials from the United Arab Emirates – the first time President Niyazov himself did not take part in such negotiations. This led to speculation that the president indeed saw his son as a possible successor.[14] Murat was also apparently playing the role of middleman in negotiations between Turkmenistan and Iran.[15]

---

[5] Aldar Kose, "Kto budet pravit' Turkmenistan posle Niiazova?" [Who will rule Turkmenistan after Niyazov?], Gündogar website, 11 November 2005, www.gundogar.org; A. Grozin, "Tochechnyi udar. Turkmenbashi naprashivaetsia na dvortsovyi perevorot" [A precise blow. Turkmenbashi is asking for a palace coup], 2 November 2005, www.globalrus.ru.

[6] Crisis Group interview, June 2006.

[7] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

[8] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

[9] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

[10] In August 2003 Niyazov amended the constitution to lessen parliament's powers and make the 2,504-member Halk Maslahaty, a conglomeration of elected representatives from each of Turkmenistan's 65 districts, as well as ministers, government officials, parliamentarians, and clan elders, the most important legislative body. Prior to his death, it met only once a year, to praise him. Niyazov was its chairman for life. The Mejlis (Assembly) consists of 50 elected parliamentarians, who are also members of the Halk Maslahaty but have no political power or freedom.

[11] See "Konstitutsionnyi zakon Turkmenistana o vnesenii izmenenii i dopolnenii v Konstitutsiiu Turkmenistana" [Constitutional law of Turkmenistan on introducing amendments and additions to the Constitution of Turkmenistan], www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/countri/ c&zakon.html. Also, "Constitutional Changes Strengthen Secret Services", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), News Briefing Central Asia, 9 January 2007, at http://iwpr.net/?p=btm&s=b&o=328366&apc_state=henb.

[12] Crisis Group interview, May 2006.

[13] Kose, op. cit. J.H. Saat, "Turkmenistan: People! Motherland! Leader?", Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2005, www.da.mod.uk; Ukraine Daily, "Niiazov Murad Saparovich," www.uadaily.net.

[14] Mekhman Gefarly, "Naslednik 'ottsa vsekh turkmen'" [The successor to the "Father of All Turkmen"], *Novye izvestiia*, 4 July 2006, www.newizv.ru.

[15] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

Sources close to Murat say that he had genuinely hoped to succeed his father.[16]

The president's daughter, Irina, lives in Paris, was thought to have a much closer relationship with her father and was seen by some as a more likely successor.[17] However, she is little-known in Turkmenistan, and few people expect a woman to lead the country any time soon.[18]

2. The military

As elsewhere in Central Asia, the main armed resource of the regime and its allies is not the regular military but the security services, which in general tend to be much better funded and politically connected. As in most post-Soviet states, the military is underfunded and poorly trained and equipped. In recent years it has served more as a captive labour force and a "halfway house" for unemployed, potentially troublesome young men than anything else.[19] This may well be intentional, to ensure that it cannot pose a threat. After Niyazov's death, there were reports that the defence minister, Agageldi Mamedgeldiyev, had been arrested. Although he soon resurfaced,[20] and it is impossible to say with any certainty, there may be some truth to initial stories of his detention so as to prevent any interference with Berdimuhammedov's and Rejepov's efforts to consolidate power in the critical first hours.

3. Local elites

A more interesting question involves local elites, including "clan" elders. Much has been written about Turkmenistan's clan structure, and these divisions do seem to still play a role in certain social interactions. Prior to Niyazov's death, there was speculation that a power vacuum after his departure could lead to a collapse of the state along clan lines. However, new networks of political and economic patronage, deriving in part from Soviet times, appear to play a much larger role than traditional clan networks.[21] Moreover, Niyazov's constant reshuffling and purges of local administrations was likely in part intended to prevent the emergence of locally- or clan-based rivals. This does not rule out such an emergence in the future, however, especially if the new regime's grip on power falters. "Right now, everyone is still in a state of shock", a former official said, "but once they begin to come to, they might well decide to try to consolidate their own power, and perhaps even challenge the regime".[22]

Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or even Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan lacks powerful independent oligarchs who could use their wealth and influence to affect the political situation. Some members of the elite apparently managed to amass small fortunes before securing positions abroad, such as ambassador, that in effect put them – and their money – out of Niyazov's reach. It is unclear, however, what connections, if any, these people may maintain in Turkmenistan, and what, if any, influence they may be able to exert.

4. The opposition

Given the regime's totalitarian nature, there are no officially-recognised opposition groups openly working inside the country. The weak and divided opposition is abroad, most of its leaders former officials who fell from favour. The Republican Party of Turkmenistan is led by Nurmuhammed Hanamov, a former government minister and ambassador to Turkey. The Watan ("Homeland") Movement is headed by Hudayberdi Orazov, a former Central Bank chief. The two groups announced they were backing Orazov as the opposition's presidential candidate, a purely symbolic gesture, as they were not allowed to participate in the election.

A third group is the United Democratic Opposition of Awdy Kuliyev, which recently called on the international community to support a "flour revolution" in Turkmenistan, using shipments of bread products or their promise to pressure the new government on reforms. Kuliyev's group backed Nurberdi Nurmamedov, deputy chairperson of the sole remaining in-country opposition movement, Agzybirlik ("Accord") for president; this was followed by reports that Nurmamedov had been abducted. He resurfaced but is under de facto house arrest. A fourth group is the parliament in exile, headed by Nazar Soyunov. In general, the opposition is deeply divided, riven with personal disputes and rivalries. Its members' years abroad, largely in Western Europe, seem to have

[16] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.
[17] Kose, op. cit.
[18] Crisis Group interviews, May and June 2006.
[19] In recent years, Turkmenistan's soldiers have served in such capacities as street sweepers, cotton pickers, passenger train conductors, bakers, public transportation drivers and nurses.
[20] "Ministr oborony Turkmenii prinial uchastie v zasedanii Khalk Maslakhaty" [Turkmenistan's defence minister has taken part in the session of the Halk Maslahaty], lenta.ru 26 December 2006.
[21] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.
[22] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

isolated them from potential support inside the country, where their influence appears to be minimal.

5. Radical Islamic groups

There is little information about the activity of radical Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir inside Turkmenistan.[23] Although reports of leaflets with religious content – one of Hizb ut-Tahrir's preferred means of spreading its message in Central Asia – do surface occasionally, it is not known if these are produced within the country itself. Under Niyazov, the ever-vigilant security services were apparently able to keep a lid on religious dissent. Radical or militant Islamist groups are unlikely to pose a serious challenge to the new regime at the present time. However, the intellectual and ideological vacuum Niyazov's death has left could well create the conditions for the rise of such groups, especially if the political situation becomes less stable.

C. THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Following Niyazov's funeral, the Halk Maslahaty declared that elections would be held on 11 February 2007, and named Berdimuhammedov and five others as candidates.[24] No one from the opposition based abroad was allowed to stand, however, and it was clear from the start that Berdimuhammedov, who reportedly enjoyed the full support of the Central Election Commission (CEC), would win. Other candidates were not allowed to make campaign pledges which diverged from Berdimuhammedov's, and all public appearances appeared to be closely scripted and monitored. In short, there was little in the conduct of the campaign to suggest a break with the past, except the government's stated willingness to allow a limited number of international observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE sent an "election support team" to "follow the election process"; it did not, however, observe or monitor the actual election, and will not issue a public report.[25] The elections were duly held on 11 February, with a reported 99 per cent turnout.[26]

Of considerably greater interest than the campaign or its pre-determined result were Berdimuhammedov's statements. He repeatedly said he intended to remain true to Niyazov's course but at the same time promised a nuumber of socio-economic changes which indicated a certain willingness to repair the damage done by some of Niyazov's excesses. Among the most notable pledges were to:

- provide internet access to every citizen;
- continue to provide free gas, electricity, salt, and water;
- "reconsider" the pension system, while increasing scholarships, social security payments, and state salaries;
- build additional schools and institutes of higher education;
- reinstate ten-year study at secondary schools; and
- expand opportunities for study abroad, particularly in the West, as well as for technical training abroad.

Moreover, there have reportedly been discussions in the Security Council about releasing funds to farmers on time, and an order is said to have gone out to secure funding for pension reform. There have been reports that the Security Council has requested that new money be printed without the likeness of Niyazov – his portrait has been removed from some public buildings – and has halted the destruction of private houses in Ashgabat.[27] The Security Council is also said to be considering what to do about political prisoners.[28]

---

[23] Hizb ut-Tahrir seeks the overthrow of all existing governments in the Islamic world and their replacement by a unitary, world-wide caliphate. Its original Central Asian centre was Uzbekistan but it now operates throughout the region. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003.

[24] These were: Amanniyaz Atajykov, deputy governor of Dashoguz province; Muhammednazar Gurbanov, administrator of Karabekaul district of Lebap province; Orazmurat Garajayev, mayor of the city of Abadan in Ahal province; Ishankuly Nuriyev, deputy minister for oil, gas, and mineral resources; and Ashirniyaz Pomanov, mayor of the city of Türkmenbashy.

[25] The OSCE cited "time constraints" for not dispatching a formal observers' mission, press release, 31 January 2007, http://www.osce.org/item/23139.html.

[26] "Okonchatel'naia iavka na vyborakh v Turkmenii sostavila 99%" [The final turnout in Turkmenistan's elections was 99 per cent], Ferghana.ru 11 February 2007, http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=5064&mode=snews&PHPSESSID=53b28cc23b0 c96be89bb5ab8ef9ab9e5.

[27] Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

[28] Reported in the Eurasia Transition Group's 23 January 2007 "Turkmenistan News" bulletin.

All this suggests a certain level of awareness within the inner circle that Niyazov's course simply cannot be fully maintained if Turkmenistan is to survive as a state. It also seems to indicate that Berdimuhammedov and his allies are at the very least concerned to forestall the possibility that dissatisfaction over the country's many, long-hidden socio-economic crises could lead to outright dissent. There is hope that these are indeed signs of the beginning of the undoing of the Niyazov era and that the new government may possibly implement some genuine reforms now that it has secured its position by the manipulated election.

But there are also reasons for concern. It is not clear that the country has the means to implement some of the pledges. Years of systematic pillaging have left state coffers all but empty. Some more sceptical observers dismiss the promises as election slogans, designed only to quell potential internal unrest and deflect foreign – especially Western[29] – criticism while a new "junta" consolidates its power. Indeed, the new government has yet to take any concrete steps which would indicate its openness to reform. None of those things have been done which would cost little money and pose no inherent threat to the regime but would go far toward demonstrating good will, such as lifting the ban on foreign degrees and the restrictions on travel abroad or offering the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to places of detention.

There is little in the biographies of Berdimuhammedov and Rejepov to indicate that either is of a particularly reformist bent, and reports of human rights abuses and pressure on independent activists still surface.[30]

The most alarming – still unconfirmed – is of the shooting by security forces of 23 inmates in late December 2006 after unrest broke out in the notorious Owadandepe prison, located deep in the Karakum desert and the final destination for many who fell from Niyazov's favour.[31] Since then, there have been reports that the new government has ordered the destruction of the prison and the transfer of some inmates – including the former oil, gas, and mineral resources mininster, Yolly Gurbanmuradov – to house arrest.[32]

Berdimuhammedov's implicit recognition of the fallout from the Niyazov legacy does give hope that the new government will be guided by a certain pragmatism. The new government must realise that it is in its own best interests at least to improve access to education and health care. Greater economic freedom could improve livelihoods, reducing tensions and dissent.

III. NIYAZOV'S LEGACY

Niyazov's more than twenty years in power set his country on a path towards self-destruction. Although its natural gas reserves provide great wealth, the regime used this to its own benefit, creating a cult of personality while systematically dismantling civil society, education, and health care. Vast amounts of money from the export of hydrocatbons were kept locked away in special offshore accounts. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan quickly became one of the world's most isolationist and repressive states.

[29] Pledges such as unlimited internet access, some sceptics point out, seem more geared towards Western audiences than the Turkmen population. "To most people in Turkmenistan, the internet is about as familiar as a flying saucer", a human rights activist said. Crisis Group interview, January 2007.

[30] A case in point is that of Andrei Zatoka, an ethnic Russian environmental activist from Dashoguz. Zatoka was arrested on 17 December 2006 for disturbing the peace; this charge was later upgraded to the much more serious ones of illegal possession of poisonous materials and firearms; Zatoka thus faced many years in prison. An international campaign in his support was launched, and in an open letter to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Zatoka's relatives denied the charges against him, pointing out that the snake venom in his possession was related to his work as a herpetologist, and that the weapon in question was a pneumatic rifle, for which no special permit was required. See http://zatoka.wordpress.com /2007/01/16/protest-in-washington-dc-and-letter-from-zatokas-family/. On 31 January 2007, Zatoka was convicted on all charges, but given a three-year suspended sentence, a method often used by the Niyazov regime in cases which had garnered international attention.

[31] The Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation has published a letter on its website purporting to be from a member of the Turkmen military detailing the massacre, "Khronika: golosa, ekhom otozvavshiesia v Karakume" [Chronicle: Voices echoing in the Karakum], http://www.tmhelsinki.org/ru/ modules/news/article.php?storyid=686.

[32] "Neskol'ko vliiatel'nykh uznikov tiur'my Ovadan-Depe perevedeny pod domashnii arrest" [Some influential prisoners of Owadandepe have been transferred to house arrest], Fergana.ru 5 February 2007, http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php? id=5001& mode=snews&PHPSESSID=ad89d0b2a7d9df53791eb29519bf 5963.

A. THE CULT OF PERSONALITY AND THE ONE-MAN STATE

Styling himself "Turkmenbashi" – "Leader of the Turkmen" – a title he later embellished with the epithets "*Serdar*" ("Leader") and "*Beýik*" ("the Great"), Niyazov constructed a massive cult of personality. His portrait was ubiquitous on banknotes, buildings and the corner of the screen of every television program broadcast by Turkmenistan's exclusively state-controlled television channels. Most prominent was his fondness for erecting giant monuments to himself, including golden statues, sprawling palaces, two mosques, one accompanied by an enormous mausoleum dedicated to his family members in his native town of Gypchak.[33] Niyazov renamed months of the year and days of the week: January became "Turkmenbashi", April became "Gurbansoltan" (the name of Niyazov's mother), October "Garaşsyzlyk" ("Independence"), and December Bitaraplyk ("Neutrality"). He also inscribed his name on the landscape, renaming the Caspian Sea port city of Krasnovodsk "Türkmenbashy" in 1993.

In 2001, Niyazov published the *Ruhnama* ("Book of the Spirit"), which contained his musings on Turkmen history, culture, and traditions and soon became mandatory at all levels of education; those seeking driver's licenses or state employment were required to pass a test on the *Ruhnama*, which was also honoured as a month (September) and accorded a monument in the centre of Ashgabat. Phrases from it were inscribed beside Koranic verses on mosques. Niyazov said in 2006 that anyone who read his book three times was guaranteed to go to heaven. In 2004, he published a second volume of the *Ruhnama*, containing his poems. Casual statements by Niyazov – such as his reported dislike for the opera, lip synching during concerts, the wearing of beards and long hair by young men and of makeup by newscasters, and gold teeth – were haphazardly interpreted as law by officials anxious to ingratiate themselves with their leader.[34]

The foreign press often regarded such steps with amusement. However, the Niyazov personality cult was only the most visible manifestation of a stark fact: absolute power rested in his hands, and his alone. Niyazov was simultaneously president and chairman of the Council of Ministers. His Democratic Party of Turkmenistan was the only political party allowed, and all elected delegates to the two legislative bodies – the Halk Maslahaty, of which he was also the head, and the Mejlis – belonged to it.

Niyazov was well-known for appointing and removing officials at all levels of government at a dizzying rate, with some remaining in office only a few months before being sacked – and in some cases sentenced to internal exile or lengthy prison terms for alleged wrongdoings. His regular purges of the government, to which some of his closest supposed allies fell prey, kept many guessing as to who could possibly succeed him, even as he announced the possibility of presidential elections for 2009.[35]

B. EDUCATION

The education system is in a shambles. Funding has been dramatically reduced, as has the length of study, and curricula are increasingly dominated by ideology. Thirteen years of ruinous "reforms" leave the country facing a bleak future, as few students have been educated to a useful level.

In December 2005, Niyazov suggested that all educational institutes should be funded by local, not central governments, a disastrous step given the

[33] This is now Niyazov's resting place. The French construction giant Bouygues played a major role in constructing many of his monuments to himself see David Garcia, *Le pays où Bouygues est roi* (Paris, 2006).

[34] The Niyazov cult, for all its excesses, has analogues elsewhere in the former Soviet Union's successor states, where images of the leader and his words grace the landscape. This is certainly true in Central Asia. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's image is ubiquitous in Kazakhstan, and students and faculty alike in Uzbekistan's universities are required to pass examinations on the works of President Islom Karimov. Images and sayings of Tajikistan's President Emomalî Rahmonov are rare in Dushanbe but increasingly common elsewhere. Even in relatively liberal Kyrgyzstan, signs bearing quotes from President Kurmanbek Bakiyev have begun to appear on roadsides, an uncomfortable echo of the days when the words of ousted President Askar Akayev – and, increasingly, his wife Mayram – were a common sight.

[35] In a mid-2005 purge, two officials long seen as among Niyazov's closest allies (Oil, Gas, and Mineral Resources Mininster Yolly Gurbanmuradov, and presidential administration head Rejep Saparov) were sacked and sentenced to twenty and 25 years in prison respectively for alleged crimes including graft, abuse of office, and treason. Gurbanbibi Atajanova, the ferociously loyal prosecutor general who had overseen all major political trials for nine years, including those of Gurbanmuradov and Saparov, resigned in April 2006, citing poor health, and was arrested almost immediately thereafter. That same month she publicly confessed to taking bribes and stealing state property and was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

dismal state of most local economies.[36] According to the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), the number of schools has fallen since independence from 1,800 to 1,705, while the number of pupils has grown from 700,000 to one million. At the same time, institutes of higher education have increased from seven to sixteen, though students studying in university in 2006 – not counting those engaged in the required two years of "practical work" – are one sixth of the number in 1993.[37] Specialised schools have also been hard hit. The Technical College in Türkmenbashy shut down in 1994, and medical schools in Mary, Türkmenabat and Nebitdag admitted their last students in 2003. The three-year agricultural schools are being replaced by one-year schools.[38] Ideological education based on the *Ruhnama* is all-pervasive in the curriculum.[39] The new generation of teachers, with just two years of training, also seems to be less competent.[40]

University education has been reduced from five years to two, plus the requirement that students spend two years working in the private sector before receiving a diploma.[41] On 6 July 2003, Niyazov ordained that only those students who could submit proof of two-years prior work experience could be admitted to university. Part-time study and evening classes have been abolished.[42]

Fourteen privately-funded Turkish lycées offer a much higher level of education but their tuition fees are a problem for many. Ashgabat has a single Turkmen-Russian school, with 600 places, whose curriculum is based on that of the Russian Ministry of Education.[43]

Some turn to study abroad to escape the suffocating ideology and acquire genuine knowledge and skills, with the U.S., Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and especially Russia, popular destinations. Yet, those who opt for this alternative face hurdles. Costs can be prohibitively high. While some exchange programs provide financial support, participants may experience difficulties getting re-admitted to local educational institutions once they return.[44] Moreover, in 2004, all foreign-earned degrees were declared invalid;[45] consequently, many qualified graduates stay away. Still, study abroad remains popular. "What's the option?", a former aid worker asked. "You either send your children abroad to get a halfway decent education, or you just let them rot in the system".[46]

A local alternative is offered by small, private, commercial training organisations, which have sprung up in cities all over the country. With certificates from the ministry of education, these centres offer supplementary training in such fields as English and computer skills. At relatively affordable prices – usually around $50 for a ten-week course – they have become a popular choice for parents seeking to boost their children's education.[47] Nevertheless, there are only limited opportunities for escape from Turkmenistan's stultifying official education system, the long-term consequences of which could be dire for the country. As a former aid

[36] "Education in Turkmenistan", Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), November 2006, p. 5.
[37] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
[38] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[39] For example, TIHR provides excerpts from a history examination card, on which 26 of 57 questions were devoted to state ideology, including topics such as "Saparmurat Ataevich Niyazov – Serdar and creator of independence"; "Saparmurat Turkmenbashi – the leader of Turkmen people in the world"; "*Ruhnama* – the sacred book of [the] Turkmen"; "Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's teaching about [the] spiritual renewal of society"; "Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's teaching about transition from [a] totalitarian system to [a] democratic society"; and "Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's teaching about building [a society based on] the rule of law…in Turkmenistan". Examination cards for ninth-grade biology students collected by TIHR showed that one of two questions was always devoted to Niyazov's ideology. One example was: "1. Flora life forms. Wise sayings and poems about plants in the Paternal books of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi the Great. 2. Annelida. Earthworms and their significance for increasing land fertility", "Education", TIHR, op. cit., pp. 14-15. Pupils are expected to study the *Ruhnama* one hour per week in the second grade, two hours per week in eighth grade, for example, "Education", TIHR, op. cit., p. 16. At the same time, "Turkmenistan's Ministry of Education encourages the practice of studying all school subjects through the prism of Niyazov's works, primarily [the] *Ruhnama*, which is referred to as the holy book…[of] the country", ibid., p. 13. Thus, from a math exercise: "The chapter '[The] Turkmen nation' of the sacred *Ruhnama* consists of 60 pages, and the chapter 'The State of [the] Turkmen' sixteen pages more. How many pages are there in the second chapter?", ibid., p. 14. The *Ruhnama*'s influence on the curriculum thus may be greater than the hours specifically assigned for its study alone imply.
[40] Crisis Group interview, April 2006.

[41] A former aid worker stated that only a tiny fraction of Turkmen students are able to find jobs and that what opportunities they do find are generally "laughable", Crisis Group interview, August 2006.
[42] "Education", TIHR, op. cit., p. 8.
[43] "Turkmenistan: Learning the Turkish Way", IWPR, 11 July 2005, www.iwpr.net; "Education", TIHR, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
[44] Crisis Group interview, August 2006.
[45] "Education", TIHR, op. cit., p. 19.
[46] Crisis Group interview, August 2006.
[47] Crisis Group interview, August 2006.

worker put it, "a lot of time in the universities is just spent preparing for holidays and festivals. The students come out with no knowledge at all – they're just used to dancing and putting up bunting".[48]

Technical workers of all kinds, including those in the economically vital hydrocarbons sector, tend to be brought in from abroad, since there are fewer and fewer qualified Turkmen citizens as the Soviet-educated generation moves toward retirement. Turkmenistan may soon be faced with a severe shortage of specialists of all kinds, from teachers to medical professionals to air-traffic controllers. Some Turkmen warn that a "lost generation" of minds brought up without a balanced education will be vulnerable to radical movements once Niyazov's ideology disappears.[49]

A dramatic restructuring of the education system must be a priority of whatever new government emerges. Acting President Berdimuhammedov has tacitly acknowledged this but has taken no concrete steps to address the problem.

C. THE HEALTH CARE SECTOR

Health care is likewise on the verge of a grave crisis.[50] Like the education sector, it has been stripped of much of its funding; a December 2004 decree in effect privatised the system, requiring that local hospitals and clinics fund themselves. At the same time, Niyazov spent millions to ensure his own access to the latest medical treatments; it is not clear whether he paid for this out of his own pockets or from state coffers.

The results of the privatisation decision have been catastrophic. Patients now have to pay half the costs at the point of delivery (with the other 50 per cent from medical insurance). Rural clinics have been downgraded and now have only one trained doctor – if any. District hospitals have been shut, so patients must travel to regional hospitals. Even there, a number of specialist services have been withdrawn and are now only available in Ashgabat.[51] In stark contrast to these massive spending cuts, the new ministry of health building in the capital is a futuristic $12 million creation, though it has been characterised as merely a "façade".[52]

The deformed "free-market" health-care system also gives specialist doctors an interest in prescribing expensive procedures from which they make substantial profits. At the same time, the wages of anaesthetists, nurses and general surgeons have fallen.[53] Corruption has led to reduced vaccination rates, since funds meant to procure supplies are often diverted.[54]

It is extremely difficult to get accurate information about the state of health care due to the government's refusal even to admit that there are a number of serious diseases in the country. The Turkmen Helsinki Fund, for example, reported the suppresion of information about cases of AIDS, typhoid, plague, tuberculosis, anthrax and cholera. Doctors are ordered to diagnose such diseases as minor ailments.[55] The approach is a potentially catastrophic one in an area of the world where rates of HIV/AIDS infection and tuberculosis (including multiple-drug resistant forms) are growing rapidly.

A recent ministry of health decree ordered the compulsory redundancy of all doctors over pensionable age. Pension cuts mean they will receive very few benefits.[56] Many Turkmen leave the country for treatment in neighbouring Uzbekistan.[57] Some doctors who have lost their jobs have gone there or as far away as Russia.[58]

---

[48] Crisis Group interview, August 2006.
[49] Crisis Group interview, June 2006.
[50] For a comprehensive overview of health issues, see Bernd Rachel and Martin McKee, "Human rights and health in Turkmenistan", policy brief, 2005, available at www.lshtm.ac.uk/ecohost/prjects/health-turkmen.htm.
[51] "Reform of the health care system", TIHR, 19 April 2006, at www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/files2/060419healthcaresystem(eng).doc.
[52] V. Volkov, O. Sariev, "Siluet kobry. Turkmenskoe zdravokhranenie umiraet" [The silhouette of the cobra. Turkmen health care is dying], Deutsche Welle, 15 December 2005, www.centrasia.ru.
[53] "Turkmen patients pay for privatisation", IWPR, 26 April 2005, www.iwpr.net.
[54] V. Volkov, O. Sariev, "Turkmeniia: vaktsinatsiia bez vaktsin" [Turkmenistan: vaccinations without vaccines], Deutsche Welle, 1 November 2005.
[55] "Sanitarno-epidemiologicheskaia situatsiia v Turkmenistane vyzyvaet trevogu" [The sanitary and epidemiological situation in Turkmenistan raises alarm], Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, 13 February 2006, www.tmhelsinki.org. Правозащитная организация ТХФ обнародовала документ о санитарно-эпидемиологической ситуации в Туркмении
[56] "Sokrashchenie meditsinskikh rabotnikov…za schet pensionerov" [A reduction in medical workers… at pensioners' expense], Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, 15 May 2006, www.tmhelsinki.org.
[57] Kamron Kambarov, "To Uzbekistan, for Care", Eurasianet 6 October 2005, www.eurasianet.org.
[58] Sian Glaessner, "Grim reality of Turkmen health care", BBC, 16 November 2005, news.bbc.co.uk.

D. THE ECONOMY

The domestic economy is in deep crisis. While government figures have consistently shown a growth in annual GDP of over 20 per cent,[59] the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) estimates the real rate was 6 per cent in 2005 and again in 2006.[60] However, even this primarily represents profits from the export of hydrocarbons. The exact amount of Turkmenistan's hydrocrabon reserves, particularly natural gas, are a closely-kept secret, as is the amount of money generated by their export. Virtually all the gas is purchased by the Russian giant, Gazprom, which then sells it to Ukraine and Western Europe. Proposals to build a pipeline linking Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan received only lukewarm support from Niyazov, who in effect controlled all gas and oil deals himself.[61] Their profits went into the Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund (FERF) and the Oil and Gas Fund, controlled by Niyazov and senior ministers and used for personal gain and grandiose projects.[62]

The isolation of the hydrocarbon sector from the rest of the economy has meant that its revenues have not benefited the people of the country:

- The infant mortality rate of 80 per 1,000 live births is similar to that of Pakistan (80) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (81), despite the fact that Turkmenistan has a per capita income more than twice that of the former and nearly five times that of the latter.[63]
- Turkmenistan ranked 105th out of 177 countries on the UN Human Development Index (HDI) in 2006, down from 83 as recently as 2001, when oil and gas revenues were substantially lower.[64]
- GDP per capita peaked in 1988 at $6,585. In 2004, it was $4,584,[65] despite the great increase in oil and gas revenues, indicating that actual earnings of average citizens have declined substantially.

While living standards in Ashgabat and other urban centres are good by Central Asian standards, life in rural communities has grown steadily worse. Transparency International rates Turkmenistan as the third most corrupt country in the world.[66] Mass lay-offs in the education and healthcare systems and even the energy sector have led to unemployment. Military conscripts are often used as free labour to fill the gaps.[67] Foreign investment has fallen steadily; the EIU estimated a 10 per cent reduction in 2005. There is an ongoing process of demonetisation, particularly in rural areas, where shortages of cash have led to a rise in barter among state enterprises and the public.[68] In February 2006, Niyazov added to the economic misery by canceling the pensions of 100,000, as well as ending maternity and sick leave payments.[69]

The agricultural sector is likewise in a state of disarray. Though a limited land reform has been in place, by and large farmers can only grow the two most important crops – wheat and cotton – subject to state orders: the state decides how much of each crop shall be planted, by whom, and when, and it is the sole purchaser of the harvest, at a low price. As a consequence of poor planning and a lack of incentives for farmers to produce, crop yields have been devastatingly low in recent years. One example is the wheat harvest of 2005. In July it was reported at 3.1 million tons, a record and easily enough to feed the entire population.[70] However, by November, massive shortages and huge price increases were reported for flour all over the country. The discrepancy was widely attributed to officials' fear at admitting they had not met targets.[71] The agricultural

[59] The figure for 2005 was 21 per cent, "Turkmenistan reports rapid economic growth in 2005", Turkmen government website, 18 January 2006, via BBC Monitoring.
[60] "Country Report: Turkmenistan", Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), January 2007.
[61] "Niyazov was never serious about the trans-Caspian pipeline", a former gas industry executive said. "He had made enough money; he had a good deal with Gazprom, and all he wanted to do was stay rich, stay in power and not antagonise Russia", Crisis Group interview, January 2007. A subsequent Crisis Group report will deal with this issue in greater detail.
[62] For more details on the FERF, see Crisis Group Report, *Cracks in the Marble*, op. cit.; also, "It's a Gas: Funny business in the Turkmen-Ukraine gas trade", Global Witness, April 2006, available online at www.globalwitness.org/reports.
[63] United Nations Human Development Report 2006.
[64] Ibid, 2001.
[65] Ibid. There was not large population growth in this period that would create this effect. If Turkmenistan receives much higher prices for its gas in 2007, per capita income may increase substantially, without necessarily meaning that the greater revenues were benefiting average citizens.
[66] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2005", available online at transparency.org.
[67] "Turkmenistan: Half-Starved Soldiers Prop Up Economy", IWPR, 23 December 2005, www.iwpr.net.
[68] EIU, op. cit., p. 17
[69] "Turkmen president cancels pensions, cuts welfare benefits", Dow Jones International News, 2 February 2006.
[70] "Turkmenistan claims record grain harvest", RFE/RL, 11 July 2005, www.rferl.org.
[71] Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: what happened to 'record' grain harvest?", RFE/RL, 8 November 2005, www.rferl.org.

crisis continued into 2006, when Niyazov's admission of a poor harvest caused panic-buying of flour that drove prices up by a reported 25 per cent.[72]

The major export crop is cotton, though harvest failures, coupled with the growth in gas prices, reduced its share of export earnings for 2005 to an estimated 1 per cent.[73] As in other Central Asian countries, the cotton industry causes widespread political, economic, social and environmental problems.[74] The estimated harvest for 2005 was around 720,000 tons, about a third of the official target.[75] In October 2005, a number of officials were sacked for failing to reach that target.[76] The disastrous 2006 harvest yielded less than half the planned two million tons, and the governors of all five provinces were fired.[77]

The government continues to import modern agricultural technology: a $55 million contract was signed with the U.S. Case Corporation on 15 August 2006.[78] However Turkmen sources note that one reason for the low yields is that expensive foreign harvesting technology generally stands idle, as nobody has the skills to use it. Children were still manually harvesting cotton in the fields for two months of the school year in 2005.[79] Child labour was also used in the 2006 harvest, in violation of a 2005 law banning the practice.[80]

E. THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment is the subject of much regime boasting, but the actual situation varies from mediocre to poor. The country is under enormous environmental stress. Despite having the financial means available to make better policy choices, environmental funding and studies have declined markedly since the end of the Soviet period.[81]

State-controlled television asserts that "Turkmenistan is one of the recognised leaders among the states conducting an ecological policy in the oil and gas sector".[82] According to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), developed at Yale University in the U.S., however, it ranked 104 of 133 countries assessed, one slot above Uzbekistan and 34 below Kazakhstan.[83] Turkmenistan performed below its income and geographic group in five of six categories, with serious problems in air quality, water resources, biodiversity and habitat, and environmental health. In sustainable energy, it received the lowest possible score, zero.[84]

Partly as a result of the many environmental agreements Turkmenistan has signed,[85] the UN has funded some projects, such as one worth $30 million to provide drinking water to the Caspian town of Guyjik.[86] Niyazov, though content to take aid, showed little interest in investing in the environment. On the contrary, the regime pursued many policies that worsened matters. For example, in April 2005, Niyazov issued a decree allowing sheep to graze in the nature reserves, saying that "in Soviet times too many nature reserves were created".[87] In 2006, he ordered that the number of cattle raised be increased from eight million to twenty million, (in Soviet times the number was one million).[88] Creation of the 2000-sq. km "Golden Age Lake" in the Karakum Desert, was decreed without any assessment of its environmental impact.[89]

---

[72] EIU, op. cit.
[73] Ibid, p. 28.
[74] Crisis Group Asia Report N°93, *The Curse of Cotton: Central Asia's Destructive Monoculture*, 28 February 2005.
[75] EIU, op. cit., p. 26.
[76] "Turkmen officials sacked over low cotton production", RFE/RL, 7 October 2004, www.rferl.org.
[77] EIU, op. cit.
[78] "Turkmenistan buys another batch of agricultural machinery from Case Corporation," 15 August 2006, www.turkmenistan.ru.
[79] Crisis Group interview, May 2006.
[80] EIU, op. cit.
[81] "Turkmen ecological wonders endangered", *The Times of Central Asia*, 3 June 2005.
[82] "Turkmenistan Hails its Caspian Sea Protection Measures", BBC Monitoring Central Asia, 8 September 2005.
[83] "Pilot 2006 Environmental Performance Index", Yale Centre for Environmental Law & Policy and Centre for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), in collaboration with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, 26 January 2006.
[84] Ibid. A previous assessment, the "Environmental Sustainability Index" (ESI), 11 February 2005, produced by the same organisations, ranked Turkmenistan second from last of all countries evaluated.
[85] These include the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on the Fight against Desertification.
[86] "Turkmenistan kicks off projects of caspian ecologic program", *The Times of Central Asia*, 31 March 2005.
[87] "Turkmen ecological wonders endangered", *The Times of Central Asia*, 3 June 2005.
[88] Crisis Group interview, November 2006.
[89] Among other issues, the construction of this lake, currently underway, is likely to lead to serious disputes over water-use rights with Uzbekistan. Disputes over sharing of water

According to officials interviewed anonymously by a journalist, "all kinds of conferences, meetings, and forums are held but these are just empty statements. Any feeble attempts by our scientists to put forward initiatives are nipped in the bud".[90] The following, from state television, shows the Niyazov regime's unscientific approach to the oil and gas industry's impact on the Caspian:

> [F]or many decades, the Caspian Sea has had to "swallow" patiently all the production and residential waste…[while] impressing the scientists with its vitality. If such a volume of pollution was dumped in any other inland water body, then it would have already been included in the list of the dead long ago. That is why the Caspian Sea is unique, because of the microelements contained in its waters which neutralise and counteract toxic pollutants, although this potential is not unlimited.[91]

In a largely desert country, where vital resources such as water and pasturage are already in critically short supply, the continuation of these policies is likely to result in severe environmental degradation and, as resources become ever scarcer, the risk of severe social disruptions, including localised violent conflict.

F. HUMAN RIGHTS

The human rights record under Niyazov was one of the most abysmal in the world. Freedom of movement of citizens was severely restricted, both inside and outside the country, with thousands on an official blacklist that denied the right to travel abroad.[92] Religious freedom was severely restricted.[93] Ethnic minorities (mostly Russians and Uzbeks, but also including smaller numbers of Kazakhs, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Iranians, and Baluchis) were in effect subjected to forced Turkmenification, denied native-language education and required to dress in Turkmen national dress and observe Turkmen customs.[94] Access to information was tightly limited; no independent media was permitted, and the internet was available only through a single government provider and closely monitored. Property rights were regularly violated; entire residential neighbourhoods of Ashgabat and other cities were routinely destroyed to make way for Niyazov's massive construction projects, often with little or no warning or compensation for those displaced.[95]

Prisoners of conscience swelled the prison population, and were often held in remote, isolated jails with no hope of family contact.[96] Forced confinement in

---

resources is a perennial inter-state problem in Central Asia. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°34, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, 30 May 2002.

[90] Crisis Group interviews, November 2006.

[91] "Turkmenistan hails its Caspian sea protection measures", BBC Monitoring Central Asia, 8 September 2005.

[92] Large parts of Turkmenistan – according to one estimate, as much as 50 per cent – are off limits even to citizens. The right of citizens to change their legal place of residence is severely restricted, Crisis Group interview, November 2006. In 2005, a new law imposed severe restrictions on entering or exiting the country; See "New law restricts exit from the country", TIHR, 6 August 2006, http://www.chrono-tm.org/?025704226900000000000011000000. As of late 2006, over 10,000 people are thought to have been included on a list of those denied the right to exit, including relatives of disgraced former government officials and current and former journalists and activists, as well as many for whom there is no readily discernible reason. "It's possible to get onto the list by mistake, but virtually impossible to get off", a human rights activist said, Crisis Group interview, November 2006.

[93] The majority Sunni Muslim community and the Russian Orthodox minority are allowed to practice their religions under tight state control. Others, such as Shi'ia Islam, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism and Armenian Apostolism, have not been allowed to open places of worship. Followers of some "non-traditional" beliefs, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas, were eventually able to win official permission to practice their faith, but are still subject to frequent harassment, including imprisonment. See reports by the Norwegian NGO Forum 18, at www.forum18.org.

[94] This was especially the case for non-Russian ethnic minorities. For more information, see the August 2005 alternative report by the International League for Human Rights (ILHR) on Turkmenistan's compliance with the United Nations Convention to End All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), available online at http://www.ilhr.org/ilhr/regional/centasia/reports/Report%20Turkm%202005.pdf.

[95] Crisis Group Reports on Turkmenistan, op. cit. Recently, large-scale demolitions have taken place in Türkmenbashy, supposedly initiated by Niyazov in response to complaints from foreign residents that there were too few places of entertainment. Particularly hard hit was the old town, in which a number of historic buildings were destroyed, Crisis Group interview, November 2006.

[96] The prison population is not published but the country is believed to have the highest incarceration rate in Asia and one of the highest in the world, with an estimated 489 prisoners per 100,000 population in 2000, International Centre for Prison Studies, http://www.prisonstudies.org/. There are reports of appalling conditions, including extreme overcrowding. A January 2006 law reduced family visiting rights from four to two per year and the right to receive parcels from six to one per year. Rights groups speculate this is partly to prevent news about conditions from reaching the outside world. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), despite several high-level visits, has not persuaded

psychiatric institutions for regime opponents, a holdover from Soviet times, was widely employed.[97] Torture and drugging with psychotropic substances were common means of extracting confessions from suspects.[98] A wave of repression following an apparent coup attempt in November 2002[99] moved the OSCE to invoke its rarely-used "Moscow Mechanism", which allows creation of an ad hoc commission of independent experts to investigate human security issues in a member state. Professor Emmanuel Decaux, rapporteur for the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), produced a 53-page report but was not allowed to visit Turkmenistan to complete his work.[100]

The case of three journalists and human rights activists – Annakurban Amankylychev, Sapardurdy Hajiyev and Ogulsapar Muradova – has attracted particular attention in the West. Their arrests in June 2006 came as Niyazov announced he had uncovered a vast spy ring, including the OSCE and the French embassy in Ashgabat. The three had been assisting a group of French journalists preparing a documentary on Turkmenistan. Muradova, 58, a correspondent for RFE/RL's Turkmen service, was apparently tortured to death in custody in September. Amankylychev and Hajiyev were each sentenced to seven years imprisonment; their current whereabouts and health are unknown.

G. DRUGS AND CRIME

Turkmenistan lies on a major trafficking route that transports illegal drugs from Afghanistan northwards through Kazakhstan to Russia and westwards over the Caspian to Azerbaijan and on to Europe.[101] In fiscal year 2005, the U.S. allocated $7 million for counternarcotics in the country, largely to support the work of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).[102] An extra $450,000 was promised in March 2006.[103] The OSCE centre in Ashgabat provided training in drugs detection for border guards and customs officials.[104] On 28 May 2006, 143 kg. of heroin and 1.5 tons of opium were burned, supposedly the total confiscated by law-enforcement agencies at the border between October 2005 and May 2006.[105]

Nevertheless, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) stated in November 2005 that the country was not fulfilling its international obligations.[106] In March 2006, Niyazov dismissed a number of officials from the ministry of internal affairs (MIA) and the prosecutor's office for profitting from drug trafficking. However, some commentators suggest that he himself had interests in the trade.[107]

---

the authorities to grant it access to work for prisoners and detainees; See "Monitoring maryiskogo dispansera MR/D-14" [A monitoring of the Mary dispenser MR/D-14], Turkmenistan Helsinki Fund (THF), 14 December 2005, and "Novye ogranicheniia, vvedennye v mestakh lisheniia svobody" [New restrictions introduced in places of detention], THF, 16 March 2006; "ICRC vice-president visits Turkmenistan", press release, 29 June 2005, www.icrc.ch..

[97] For example, Kakabay Tejenov, 70, a human rights activist, was forcibly confined to psychiatric hospital on 4 January 2006 for sending a telegram to international organisations criticising the government and its human rights record. Another government opponent, Gurbandurdy Durdykuliyev, was placed in a psychiatric institution in February 2004, a month after he sought permission to hold a critical demonstration; he was released on 12 April 2006, in connection, some speculate, to a letter from 54 members of the U.S. Congress to Niyazov calling for this, "Turkmenistan: Eshche odin dissident pomeshchen v psikhiatricheskuiu bol'nitsu" [Turkmenistan: yet another dissident has been placed in a psychiatric hospital], Memorial, 8 February 2006, www.memo.ru; "Turkmenistan: Dissident Released from Psychiatric Hospital", RFE/RL, 12 April 2006, www.rferl.org; "World Report 2006", Human Rights Watch, 18 January 2006, www.hrw.org.

[98] Both means were widely used to extract confessions from the alleged ringleaders of a November 2002 coup attempt, "Turkmenistan: The making of a failed state", International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, April 2004, at http://www.tmhelsinki.org/en/modules/wfchannel/index.php?pagenum=7.

[99] See Crisis Group Report, *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, op. cit.

[100] See Professor Emmanuel Decaux, "OSCE Rapporteur's Report on Turkmenistan", 12 March 2003.

[101] Crisis Group Asia Report Nº25, *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict,* 26 November 2001; also Crisis Group Report, *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, op. cit.

[102] "U.S. Assistance to Turkmenistan – Fiscal Year 2005", Department of State, Fact Sheet, 17 August 2005, www.usemb-ashgabat.rpo.at.

[103] "U.S. and Turkmenistan renew commitment to cooperation in security and law enforcement", U.S. embassy press release, Ashgabat, 31 March 2006, turkmenistan.usembassy.gov.

[104] "OSCE Centre helps train Turkmenistan customs and border guards to detect drugs", OSCE press release, 15 February 2006, www.osce.org.

[105] "Niiazovskii chinovnik otritsaet fakt tranzita narkotikov cherez Turkmenistan" [A Niyazov official denies the fact of narcotics transit through Turkmenistan], *Gündogar*, 29 May 2006, www.gundogar.org.

[106] "Turkmenistan: INCB calls for greater drug control compliance", IRIN, 20 November 2005, www.irinnews.org.

[107] Crisis Group Report, *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, op. cit.; also V. Volkov and O. Saryev, "Organy narkotrafika. Turkmenbashi razbiraetsia so svoimi spetsluzhbami." [Organs of drugs trafficking. Turkmenbashi

As elsewhere, drugs traficking appears to have been accompanied by a rise in addiction, which in turn has resulted in a growth in street crime. There is anecdotal evidence from Türkmenabat (formerly Chärjew) of a huge rise in petty theft, linked to local addicts seeking to finance their habit.[108] Widespread prostitution has also been tied to drug addiction.[109]

Law enforcement agencies, are, as elsewhere in much of the former Soviet Union, notoriously corrupt. According to human rights groups, anyone can be released for any crime that is not political, economic or extremely violent by paying between $2,000 and $5,000.[110] Opposition sources report that the ministry for national security (MNS) is heavily involved in "protection" of private businesses.[111]

Another major problem is the secrecy in the criminal investigation system, which leads to widespread rumours. A notable crime spree occurred in early July 2005 in the city of Mary, where up to 27 people were reported to have been killed. Sources linked the murders variously to a serial killer, a group of Islamic fundamentalists and two drug addicts. The media blackout made it impossible to tell what had actually happened.[112]

As elsewhere in Central Asia, Niyazov occasionally granted sweeping amnesties to prisoners.[113] Amnesties for a high proportion of prisoners, no probation system and very limited legal job opportunities have led to extremely high rates of recidivism.[114] A former foreign resident of Ashgabat reported that street crime and burglaries would generally spike after amnesties.[115] The most recent amnesty, timed as usual to coincide with the end of the holy month of Ramadan, released some 10,000 inmates, mostly petty criminals.[116] Beneficiaries were shown on television tearfully thanking Niyazov for their freedom. As part of the process, those released were required to take an oath to Niyazov on the Qur'an and both books of the *Ruhnama* not to repeat their transgressions.

IV. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The new president and his allies appear to be casting about for international support. They seem to be genuinely interested in ending, or at least reducing, the country's long isolation. It is understandable that many countries, particularly in the West, will welcome promises of reform and be willing to assist. Indeed, foreign technical help is probably required if the damage done by Niyazov is to be contained and perhaps even reversed.

But the international community must be careful to maintain a united, principled stance on human rights and human security and not mistake promises for action. The silence of most countries on the ouster of Atayev and seizure of power by Berdimuhammedov, as well as on the reports of the possible massacre at Owadandepe, has been deafening. While this may indicate a "wait-and-see" attitude and desire not to antagonise Niyazov's successors, it risks severely damaging international credibility and encouraging further abuses. Promises of reform must be encouraged but Turkmenistan needs to take the first practical steps towards implementing them. Offers of aid should be made against very strict benchmarks and signs that the new government is also willing to improve on its predecessor's appalling human rights record. The international community must continue to push at least for ICRC access to places of detention and inmates' relatives; a full accounting of Muradova's death and the situation of Amankylychev and Hajiyev; and investigation of the reported Owadandepe massacre.

There is some leverage. Aside from the new government's apparent uncertainty and need for support, there is the matter of Niyazov's money, part

deals with his security services], Deutsche Welle, 13 March 2006, www.centrasia.ru.

[108] Crisis Group interview, April 2006.

[109] "Okruzhennye vnimaniem i liubov'iu zhenshchiny Turkmenistana" [Turkmenistan's women, surrounded by attention and love], THF, 20 April 2006, www.tmhelsinki.org.

[110] "Itogi oprosa pomilovannykh" [Results of a survey of amnestees], THF, 24 January 2006, www.tmhelsinki.org.

[111] "Uzakonennyi reket. Chastnyi biznes v Turkmenistane" [A legalised racket. Private business in Turkmenistan], TIHR, 8 March 2006, www.centrasia.ru. The MNS is the successor to the Soviet KGB.

[112] "Turkmen murder rumours shrouded in secrecy", IWPR, 4 August 2005, www.iwpr.net; also "V Mary vvedeny povyshennye mery bezopasnosti" [In Mary tightened security measures have been introduced], Memorial, 10 July 2005, www.memo.ru.

[113] Mass amnesties are commonly used in Central Asia by regimes to boost their popularity and, occasionally, also to deal with chronic overcrowding in desperately underfinanced prisons; see Crisis Group Asia Report N°118, *Kyrgyzstan's Prison System Nightmare*, 16 August 2006.

[114] "Crime Wave in Turkmenistan", IWPR, 17 December 2005, www.iwpr.net.

[115] Crisis Group interview, December 2006.

[116] See "Turkmen president announces massive amnesty", RFE/RL, 27 September 2006, http://www.rferl.org.

of which is believed to be in Germany's Deutsche Bank (there are rumours of other overseas accounts as well). While there were reports that Niyazov's Deutsche Bank account was frozen at his death, the institution has refused to comment.[117] Strong efforts to track down and freeze Niyazov's overseas assets are vital. They should be released to the Turkmen government only on strict conditions that they be used to implement the promised socio-economic reforms.

V. CONCLUSION

Statements on developments inside Turkmenistan, such as a recent one by the German Bundestag,[118] have been few and far between. This may in large part be motivated by strategic concerns. Russia wants to maintain its near monopoly over the export of Turkmen gas. The country's proximity to Iran and Afghanistan makes it of great interest to the U.S. The EU has energy concerns and has expressed an intention to step up engagement with Central Asian states, at least partially to diversify sources, particularly of natural gas.[119] In 2006, the European Parliament considered signing an Interim Trade Agreement (ITA) with Turkmenistan as a gesture of EU willingness to "engage" with Niyazov; the idea was shelved over human rights concerns but has resurfaced. Of course, improved relations are desirable but Turkmenistan should take the initiative by improving human rights and human security for its own citizens before there is talk of renewed "engagement."

Moreover, it is not clear how much Turkmenistan could contribute to European energy security. The exact amount of its gas reserves remains secret, and there are no easy alternatives to Russia as a delivery route. European hopes that Turkmenistan will sign on to the Trans-Caspian pipeline project are unlikely to be realised anytime soon; disputes over demarcation with other littoral states, particularly Iran and Azerbaijan, persist. Moreover, if the determinedly independent Niyazov was unwilling to antagonise Russia in this area, his successors are even less likely to do so.

The Turkmen government still seems uncertain about its own future. Prior to the event, many foreign commentators – among them Crisis Group – speculated that Niyazov's sudden departure, however it might come, could trigger a bloody struggle for power. Thus far, this has not materialised. Berdimuhammedov's and Rejepov's bid for power appears to have been planned well, and they have so far marginalised any threats. Questions remain about long-term stability, however. The borders are still sealed, and the security services have reportedly ramped up their internal vigilance. The domestic situation is reported to be calm, but it is impossible to say how long this will be the case. The very way in which Berdimuhammedov came to power may work against him and his allies, providing grounds for challengers to question their legitimacy. Delays or failure to implement promised reforms could lead to unrest. Cash flow will be vital, both to fund reforms and to buy off potential rivals.

Berdimuhammedov and his allies do appear to recognise the self-destructive path on which Niyazov's policies put the country. Measures to contain or repair the most egregious damage are thus likely. While it is unlikely that the new government will take significant steps towards democratisation any time soon, the international community should continue to urge movement in this direction and offer assistance when and if it begins.

Bishkek/Brussels, 12 February 2007

[117] Crisis Group telephone conversation, Deutsche Bank representative, 24 January 2007.

[118] In its appeal, "For a Turkmenistan with a Future", the Bundestag urged the German government to encourage, inter alia, opposition participation in the February elections, an end to political repression, completion of Decaux's Moscow Mechanism investigations, an accounting of the Muradov, Hajiyev, and Amankylychev case, greater press freedom, ICRC access to places of detention, greater freedom of movement for citizens and the freezing of Niyazov's assets in Deutsche Bank, Deutscher Bundestag, 16/17 January 2007.

[119] See Andrew Beatty, "EU could ditch human rights to secure Central Asian energy", *European Voice*, 1 February 2007.

International Crisis Group
WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

International Headquarters
149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium · Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 · Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
E-mail: brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office
420 Lexington Avenue, Suite 2640, New York 10170 · Tel: +1 212 813 0820 · Fax: +1 212 813 0825
E-mail: newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office
1629 K Street, Suite 450, Washington DC 20006 · Tel: +1 202 785 1601 · Fax: +1 202 785 1630
E-mail: washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office
Cambridge House - Fifth Floor, 100 Cambridge Grove, London W6 0LE · Tel: +44 20 7031 0230 · Fax: +44 20 7031 0231
E-mail: london@crisisgroup.org

Moscow Office
Belomorskaya st., 14-1 - Moscow 125195 Russia · Tel/Fax: +7-495-455-9798
E-mail: moscow@crisisgroup.org

Regional & Local Field Offices
Crisis Group also operates from some 20 different locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.
See www.crisisgroup.org for details.