

**DOCUMENT OF THE EUROPEAN BANK
FOR RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT**

**STRATEGY FOR TURKMENISTAN
COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM THE
INTERNATIONAL HELSINKI FEDERATION
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

Comments received from the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHR)

Re: EBRD Turkmenistan Country Strategy Review

(The following is a draft of the IHR chapter on Turkmenistan covering events in the country in 2005 which is to be published. The chapter was written together with the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights – an associate of the IHF.)

Turkmenistan¹

Turkmenistan remained a repressive and closed society ruled by President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov, who controlled all branches of the state. No open political opposition was allowed, there were no alternative mass media, and the only civil society organizations that were permitted to operate were groups engaged in uncontroversial issues such as nature conservation or sports.

Anyone who sought to voice any form of dissent was highly vulnerable to persecution, and so were those few foreign journalists who remained in the country as well as relatives of exiled opposition and civil society activists.

The regime continued to emphasize ideology as a key element in its system of control, and the efforts to promote the personality cult surrounding the president increasingly assumed religious proportions. The president's spiritual code *Rukhnama* was a major instrument in these efforts. The policies of fostering a heterogeneous Turkmen nation also continued and members of ethnic and national minorities were systematically discriminated against in education and employment.

As in previous years, religious activity was severely restricted. The president sought to rid the practice of Islam of all elements considered foreign and introduced a list of "accepted" rituals to which the country's Muslims were expected to adhere. Religious minorities, including communities that had obtained state registration following a loosening of the registration rules in 2004, were subject to intimidation, raids of their homes, fines and other forms of harassment. In what appeared to be a concession to the international community, four conscientious objectors who had been imprisoned for their refusal to complete compulsory military service were released. However, alternative civilian service had yet to be introduced.

Prisons remained closed institutions and opportunities of relatives of prisoners to visit their loved ones were limited. According to available information, prison conditions were typically characterized by overcrowding, poor sanitation and widespread diseases and prisoners were subject to cruel treatment. It was believed that some of those imprisoned for their role in the alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov in late 2002, all of whom were held incommunicado, had died because of harsh prison conditions.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this chapter is based on information from the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) to the IHF.

During the year, there were new trials against people charged with involvement in the alleged assassination attempt against the president as well as former high-ranking officials who had fallen out of favor with the president. These trials were typically secret hearings in which the sentences had been established in advance.

The public health care and education systems deteriorated further because of new cuts in funding and various irrational reforms, and children continued to be exploited as labor in the cotton harvest, although to a more limited extent than in previous years. Travel abroad was monitored by the secret service and persons deemed "unreliable" were not allowed to leave the country.

Good Governance: Transparency and Corruption

Corruption was prevalent across different sectors and levels of society. The authorities acknowledged the problem, but did not take any effective measures to combat it. There were, however, a number of highly publicized cases in which former high-ranking officials were arrested and convicted of corruption related crimes. Among those punished for involvement in corruption during the year were a former head of the presidential administration, a former vice-prime minister and a former head of a government department. The hearings in cases such as these were typically closed to the public and only had the function of imposing sentences that already had been decided by the president.²

Over the last few years, the president has established a reputation of constant reshuffles within government structures as well as of targeted prosecution against officials who have fallen out of favor. A 2002 law provides that the president himself appoints all senior officials at both the federal and the regional level.³ The same law also spells out certain principles that should be taken into account in the recruitment of public sector employees, such as "patriotism and devoted service to Turkmenistan, its people and the president of Turkmenistan" and "succession of high ideological, moral qualities over several generations."

Corrupt practices existed, inter alia, within the prison and education systems. Admission to higher educational institutions could reportedly be secured by paying sums equivalent to thousands of dollars in bribes. The bribes required were the highest for the most prestigious fields of study, such as law, as well as for ethnic minority members.⁴

National Human Rights Protection

National Institutions

² "Overview of human rights issues in Turkmenistan," in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2006*, at <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/turkme12244.htm>

³ Law of Turkmenistan on the recruitment of heads and officials of public service from 9 August 2002 (136-II).

⁴ TIHR newsletter No. 119, 8 July 2005.

A national institute of democracy and human rights established by the president formally had a mandate to promote protection of the rights of the citizens of the country. However, the activities of the institute were limited to holding meetings with foreign diplomats visiting the country, and to demonstrate to these that the authorities were giving due attention to human rights concerns. During the year, meetings were held inter alia with a European Union delegation and the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Rolf Ekeus.⁵

In February, media reported that the parliamentary committee on legislation had been transformed into a committee on the protection of the rights and freedom of persons.⁶ No further information about the mandate and function of this committee was, however, available.

*Human Rights Defenders*⁷

There were no independent organizations working in the human rights field that had obtained registration with the authorities. Activities carried out by non-registered organizations were considered illegal although a criminal code article establishing criminal penalties for unregistered NGO activities was abolished in November 2004.

Those few human rights defenders who continued to work in the country did so at high personal risk and in constant fear of repercussions. As a result of the repressive climate in the country, many civil society activists have been forced into exile in recent years. In a highly worrisome trend, relatives of dissidents have been targeted and harassed in an attempt to stop exiles from criticizing government policies and speaking out about human rights violations.

In March, the brother of Farid Tukhbatullin, the leader of the exile NGO Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), was forced to resign from his position in the military and to move out from the apartment where he lived together with his family. He had previously been warned that he would be dismissed unless his brother “kept a low profile.” In 2003 Farid Tukhbatullin was found guilty of illegally crossing the border and concealing information about an alleged planned coup after attending an international human rights conference organized by the IHF and Memorial in Moscow. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment in a trial that fell seriously

⁵ See Turkmen media reports about these visits at http://turkmenistan.ru/index.php?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=6585&type=event&sort=date_desc; and

http://turkmenistan.ru/index.php?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=6682&type=event&sort=date_desc

⁶ See Turkmen media report at http://turkmenistan.ru/index.php?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=6060&type=event&sort=date_desc

⁷ This section is based on information on Turkmenistan included in IHF, *Central Asia: Human Rights NGOs Facing Increasingly Restrictive Legislation*, February 2006, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4193; and IHF interventions and recommendations to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, September 2005, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4128

short of international due process standards, but was released following an international outcry. He has since lived in exile.⁸

Elections and referendum

A second round of elections to the national parliament took place in seven electoral districts in January since no candidate received more than 50% of the votes in these districts during the first round in December 2004. Also this time, the elections were not free or fair. Only representatives of the presidential Galkanish (“Revival”) movement were allowed to run and voters were, thus, not offered any genuine choice. No international observers were present to monitor the elections. Prior to the December 2004 elections the members of an OSCE election monitoring team were denied visas to the country.

There was no true division of power in the country,⁹ and the parliament did not have any independent function but merely served to rubber stamp legislation put forward by President Niyazov.

Freedom of Expression, Free Media and Information

Turkmenistan had one of the worst records in the world in terms of media freedom. Reporters without Borders ranked Turkmenistan on place 165 out of 167 in its annual World Press Freedom Index, and described Turkmenistan as well as North Korea and Eritrea, which had the worst rankings, as the world’s “black holes” for news. The organization concluded that privately-owned media was not allowed in these countries and that freedom of expression did not exist there.¹⁰

All Turkmen media were state-owned and published only information approved by the government, and the work of journalists was closely monitored by the secret service. The few representatives of foreign media who remained in the country were subject to strong pressure. In February, Viktor Panov, a long-time correspondent for the Russian news agency RIA Novosti in Ashgabat, was arrested on spurious espionage charges and deported to Russia following more than two weeks of detention.¹¹ The same month, Nikolai Gersimov, a freelance journalist reporting for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was forced to leave the country after receiving threats.¹²

⁸ Information from the TIHR to the IHF, August 2005. See also Amnesty International, “Turkmenistan: The Clampdown on Dissent and Religious Freedom Continues,” 3 May 2005, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR610032005?open&of=ENG-TKM>.

⁹ Since 2003 the country’s legislative, executive as well as judicial branches have been subordinated to a so-called People’s Council (Halk Maslakhaty), whose supreme leader the president is.

¹⁰ See the website of Reporters without Borders, at http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=554

¹¹ Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), “Viktor Panev, RIA Novosti, imprisoned, expelled,” 24 February 2005, at http://www.cpj.org/cases05/europe_cases05/turkmen.html; Eurasianet, *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 11-17 March 2005, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/>

¹² “Overview of human rights issues in Turkmenistan” in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2006*; Eurasianet, *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 21-27 January 2005.

Internet access remained seriously restricted.

Right to a Fair Trial and Effective Remedies and Torture and Ill-treatment

Following the alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov in late 2002, more than 50 people were convicted in trials conducted in gross violation of international due process standards. Many of those convicted were believed to have been tortured and ill-treated in pre-trial detention.¹³ The fate of these people remained unknown as they were held incommunicado and were denied the right to contacts with their families or lawyers. There were, however, reports indicating that some of them had died and that others were seriously ill because of harsh treatment and prison conditions.¹⁴

In June, a new trial related to the alleged assassination attempt against the president took place, and following a closed hearing a number of men were given heavy sentences for their involvement in the 2002 events.¹⁵ Among those convicted were Begench Beknazarov, a relative of Boris Shikmuradov, former foreign minister and alleged coup leader.¹⁶ Beknazarov was reportedly sentenced to life imprisonment, while the other men received lengthy prison sentences.¹⁷

Conditions in Prisons and Detention Facilities¹⁸

No official statistics about the number of prisoners were made public, and statements made by the president were ambiguous. During a visit to Balkanabat city in August, the president indicated that there were about 14,000 prisoners in the country,¹⁹ but on a later occasion in October, he declared that slightly more than 12,000 people were serving sentences in the country's penitentiary institutions.²⁰

Prison facilities were closed institutions and it was very difficult to obtain information about prison conditions. However, according to available information, overcrowding was a serious problem and in some colonies a lack of beds meant that some prisoners had to sleep on the floor in between beds or spend the nights outdoors. There were also reports of prisoners who bribed prison guards to be given a place to sleep, sometimes even in prison mortuaries.

¹³ See IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region: Report 2004 (Events of 2003)*.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, *Concerns in Europe and Central Asia January-June 2005*, at <http://www.amnesty.org>; "Overview of human rights issues in Turkmenistan" in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2006*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Eurasia Net, *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 20-26 May 2005. Shikmuradov was tried shortly after the alleged assassination attempt and given a life sentence. For more information, see the chapter on Turkmenistan in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region. Report 2003 (Events of 2002)*, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=1322

¹⁷ Amnesty International, *Concerns in Europe and Central Asia January-June 2005*; "Overview of human rights issues in Turkmenistan" in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2006*.

¹⁸ For more information about prison conditions see TIHR Newsletter No. 161, 14 November 2005.

¹⁹ For an official Turkmen report see http://turkmenistan.ru/index.php?page_id=12&lang_id=ru&elem_id=6991&type=event&sort=date_desc

²⁰ For an official Turkmen report see http://turkmenistan.ru/index.php?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=7199&type=event&sort=date_desc

Moreover, available information suggested that sanitation was often inadequate in prison facilities and that prisoners were often subject to cruel treatment. Lack of medicines and proper health services reportedly contributed to the spread of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases as well as to numerous deaths of prisoners. Conditions in institutions providing compulsory treatment of drug addicts and alcoholics were equally poor.

Despite an announcement by the president in 2004 that representatives of the International Red Cross/Crescent would be allowed to visit the country's penitentiary institutions, no such visit had taken place as of the end of 2005. During a visit to Geneva in August, Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov claimed that conditions for admission to prison facilities were still being negotiated.

The opportunities of relatives of prisoners to visit their loved ones were restricted. According to prison regulations, a meeting of one hour was allowed once per month, and a meeting of one day once per two months. However, in practice these regulations were often violated, and the meeting time was reduced in both cases. Moreover, only a few families were typically allowed to visit their relatives on any given day, and families often had to wait for permission to access the prison building for several hours or even a whole day. Because of a lack of meeting facilities, families sometimes had to meet their loved ones in the same room as other families.

Every year since 1999, a mass amnesty has been implemented in October-November. According to an official announcement, 8,145 prisoners were released during the 2005 amnesty.²¹ No adequate program for the rehabilitation of amnestied prisoners was in place. The prisoners who were released usually experienced great difficulties in finding employment, and while some were able to make use of proposals to establish their own farms in remotely located areas, this did not solve their need for immediate income. As a result, crime and begging were common among former prisoners.

Freedom of Religion and Religious Tolerance

Overall Trends

The authorities seriously restricted all forms of religious practice, while the personality cult around President Niyazov increasingly assumed religious proportions. The president was depicted as a prophet in state propaganda, and his book the *Rukhnama* was commonly referred to as being "holy." Citizens were encouraged to study, discuss and use the *Rukhnama* as a moral code of conduct in their daily lives, and religious leaders were expected to glorify the president at the beginning of prayer recitals and to disseminate the "lofty ideas" included in the president's writing as part of worship.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Joint Statement, "Turkmenistan: Stop Religious Persecution," by the Environmental Justice Foundation, Human Rights Watch, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, International Crisis Group, International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, International League for Human Rights, Memorial Human Rights Center, Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, Turkmenistan Initiative for

Islamic Communities

There were reports indicating that the authorities stepped up their efforts to ensure that Islamic religious activity was in conformity with “Turkmen custom.”²³ Arguing that Turkmen Muslims have “their own way” of practicing their religion, President Niyazov ordered the publication of a list of “approved” rituals that the country’s Muslims would be expected to observe.²⁴

In recent years, numerous mosques have been demolished in an attempt to prevent unsanctioned Muslim worship from taking place,²⁵ and educated imams have been dismissed and replaced with imams lacking formal training. During 2005, the status of the country’s only remaining Muslim theological faculty at the State University of Ashgabat was downgraded as it was merged with the history faculty, and all foreign staff members of the faculty were dismissed. The number of students admitted to the faculty was also further reduced.²⁶

Former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who was sentenced to 22 years in prison in a secret trial in 2004, remained imprisoned. It was believed that he may have been imprisoned to punish him for his refusal to use the *Rukhnama* along with the Quran in his sermons or because of his Uzbek ethnicity.²⁷

Minority Religious Communities

In 2004 the previous requirement that religious communities must have 500 members in order to gain state registration was abolished, and unregistered religious activity was de-criminalized.²⁸ The practical impact of these changes was, however, limited.

As of October 2005, nine minority religious communities had obtained registration under the new rules, while other communities continued to be denied registration or declined to apply for registration because they did not believe that registration would facilitate their religious practice. Although criminal sanctions for unregistered religious activity had been abolished, such activity remained subject to administrative penalties and continued to be regarded as illegal by local authorities. In addition, religious practice was obstructed by bans on religious meetings in private homes as well as on independent religious education.²⁹

Human Rights and Lawrence Duce, 28 September 2005, at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/09/28/turkme11796.htm>

²³ Forum 18, “More pressure against Islamic religious practice,” 24 October 2005, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>

²⁴ Forum 18, *Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey*, October 2005.

²⁵ Forum 18, “2004, the Year of Demolished Mosques,” 4 January 2005.

²⁶ Forum 18, *Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey*, October 2005.

²⁷ For more information about the case see the chapter on Turkmenistan in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region. Report 2005 (Events of 2004)*.

²⁸ Forum 18, “Scepticism and Optimism Greet Surprise Presidential Decree,” 12 March 2004; Forum 18, “Religious Persecution’s Latest Disguises,” 13 May 2004; Forum 18, “Unregistered Religious Activity Still Illegal,” 24 May 2004.

²⁹ Forum 18, *Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey*, October 2005.

Minority religious communities also continued to face harassment, including intimidation, raids, detention, fines, and confiscation of literature. Among those targeted were members of newly registered religious communities.³⁰

On 14 August, police raided an outdoor religious service of a Baptist community in the north-eastern town of Dashoguz. The police officers involved argued that the national state registration obtained by the Baptist church was “not valid for northern Turkmenistan” and claimed that individuals can “only believe alone on their own.” The officers took note of everyone present and confiscated bibles and hymnbooks. The following day, the community leaders were summoned for interrogation and were pressured to write statements explaining why they had become Christians and to sign a declaration that the community would not meet again until it had obtained state registration.³¹

Conscientious Objection to Military Service

In a positive development, four Jehovah’s Witnesses who were serving prison sentences for refusing to serve in the army were released under a special amnesty in April.³² However, while no new conscientious objectors were imprisoned during the year, the risk to be imprisoned for rejecting compulsory military service on conscientious grounds remained since no alternative civilian service to military service existed.³³

Freedom of Movement and Communication³⁴

Although the requirement to obtain an exit visa for travel abroad was revoked in 2004, it remained difficult to travel to other countries. The secret service carefully monitored travel from the country and did not allow people deemed to be “unreliable” to leave. Among those “blacklisted” for travel abroad were activists of public organizations.

On 9 July, as a group of public activists had arrived to Ashgabat airport for the purpose of traveling to St. Petersburg under a program sponsored by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the activist Larissa Aranbaeva was detained. Her passport was confiscated and she was prohibited from exiting the country without any explanations. The TIHR condemned this incident as a violation of the right to freedom of movement and the right of Aranbaeva to interact with colleagues from other countries.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Forum 18, “Police claim ‘individuals can only believe alone,’” 18 August 2005.

³² Office of Public Information of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, “Turkmenistan Grants Amnesty to Four Conscientious Objectors,” 24 May 2005, at <http://www.jw-media.org>

³³ Forum 18, *Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey*, October 2005.

³⁴ Based on information included in TIHR report submitted to OSCE supplementary meeting on human rights defenders, Vienna, 14-15 July 2005.

Rights of the Child

The exploitation of child labor in the harvest of cotton, which is one of the major sources of state income, has been a long-standing problem in Turkmenistan. Thus, in past years, many children have been made to gather cotton for meager compensation or for free and at serious risk to their health and safety. In particular in the countryside, children have often missed several months of study because of their participation in the cotton harvest.

However, a new law adopted on 1 February 2005, which was proclaimed to be in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as other UN treaties ratified by Turkmenistan,³⁵ explicitly prohibited child labor. As a result, for the first time, mass child labor was not used during the harvest season in September-November 2005. In remote rural areas, however, children still worked in the cotton fields. Moreover, school teachers continued to be mobilized for the cotton harvest at a large scale, which interfered with school education.³⁶

Monitoring conducted by TIHR associates confirmed that many children had to work to contribute to their families' sustenance, which limited their opportunities to education and undermined their health.³⁷ It was particularly disturbing that many young girls were forced to work as prostitutes to support their families.³⁸

National and Ethnic Minorities

The authorities continued their efforts to promote a homogenous Turkmen identity, which resulted in repressive policies toward national and ethnic minorities.

Minority members faced widespread discrimination in employment, in particular public sector employment as well as in education. As all Uzbek and Kazakh language schools had been closed down, children of the Uzbek and Kazakh minorities did not have any opportunities to study in their native languages. The only language that was used as a language of instruction besides Turkmen was Russian, but also instruction in Russian has been significantly reduced in recent years.³⁹

For the first time, in August, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) reviewed a state report submitted by Turkmenistan under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (hereafter "the convention"). The report was nine years overdue.

The CERD expressed deep concern about the rhetoric and policy of "Turkmenization" conducted by the Turkmen government in the areas of employment, education and

³⁵ See <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/countri/zakon/zakon-48.html>

³⁶ TIHR Newsletter NO. 169, 29 November 2005.

³⁷ For more information, see for example TIHR Newsletters No. 134, 12 September 2005; No. 120, 8 July 2005, No. 105, 26 April 2005, and No. 84, 31 January 2005.

³⁸ For more information, see TIHR Newsletter No. 131, 2 September 2005.

³⁹ See also the chapter on Turkmenistan in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region. Report 2005 (Events of 2004)*.

political life, recalling that policies of forced assimilation amounts to racial discrimination and are in serious violation of the convention. It was dismayed at reports of discrimination against persons belonging to ethnic and national minorities, such as removals of minority members from state employment and requirements that those who wish to access higher education or public sector employment be able to show that they are Turkmen in the third generation.⁴⁰

The committee was also concerned that members of national and ethnic minorities were impeded from exercising their right to enjoy their own culture e.g. because of closures of schools teaching in minority languages as well as minority cultural institutions. Moreover, the CERD voiced concern about reports indicating that many minority members who were the victims of discrimination did not complain to courts because they feared reprisals or lacked confidence in law enforcement and judicial authorities, which often showed lack of impartiality in dealing with cases of alleged racial discrimination.⁴¹

Another issue of concern raised by the CERD was forced internal displacements, targeting in particular ethnic Uzbeks, to inhospitable parts of the country.⁴²

In April, about 40 ethnic Uzbek families were forcibly displaced from the Niyazov region of the Dashoguz province, which is located near the border to Uzbekistan, to desert areas of Turkmenistan.⁴³

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The authorities have increasingly cut funding for public services, while spending vast sums on grand construction projects.⁴⁴

The country's health care system has steadily deteriorated as local hospitals have been closed, thousands of health care workers have been dismissed and replaced with army conscripts and fees have been introduced for a growing number of medical treatments, thereby rendering them inaccessible to most people.⁴⁵

In an announcement that met with widespread international dismay and condemnation, the president stated at the beginning of the year that all hospitals located outside the capital would be closed, arguing that regional hospitals were not

⁴⁰ *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Turkmenistan*, August 2005, at <http://www.unhchr.ch>

⁴¹ *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Turkmenistan*, August 2005, at <http://www.unhchr.ch>

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ TIHR Newsletter No. 106, 02 May 2005.

⁴⁴ See the chapter on Turkmenistan in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region. Report 2005 (Events of 2004)*, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4057

⁴⁵ Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: Is President Trying to Euthanize Health Care?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 3 March 2005, at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/03/c9669708-573f-4bca-8599-88079844959b.html>; Amnesty International, "Turkmenistan: President announces large-scale closure of hospitals," *Marchy* 2005; "Turkmen leader closes hospitals," *BBC*, 1 March 2005, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4307583.stm>; Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Turkmenbashi Wields the Axe," *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 356, 11 March 2005, at http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=238797&apc_state=henirca2005

“needed” and that those were ill could come to Ashgabat. If implemented, this order would effectively have deprived many seriously ill people and people with emergency conditions from access to life-saving treatment. Many regions of the country are located far away from the capital, and many impoverished residents can hardly afford to travel even short distances.⁴⁶ It is, however, unclear to what extent the president’s announcement was actually put into practice.⁴⁷

The president also announced that regional public libraries would be closed down, claiming that “village Turkmen do not read,”⁴⁸ and in at least some regions steps were subsequently taken toward implementing this order.⁴⁹ In previous years, the president has ordered the closure of major cultural establishments, such as the state opera and ballet, the state philharmonic orchestra and the state library.⁵⁰

The standard of education in the country has also worsened considerably as a result of a number of recent reforms. The period of compulsory education has been shortened to nine years, mass dismissals of teachers have been carried out and many schools have been closed down. University education has been cut from five to two years, and as of mid-2004 higher level diplomas from foreign educational institutions were declared invalid. Moreover, education has increasingly been given an ideological content and the curriculum has increasingly been oriented around the literary works of President Niyazov, in particular his spiritual guide *Rukhnama*. Knowledge of *Rukhnama* has been made a central admission requirement to universities.⁵¹

Postscript

Turkmenistan signed many international treaties and conventions, that it hardly abides by. The good example of the situation can be the given by the Aarhus convention (1998), according to which all constructions, which can violate the ecological norms, should pass public expertize. Three the most prominent ecologically dangerous constructions' projects (Turkmenistan Lake of Golden Age, polypropylene plant in Balkan velayat and concrete plant near Ashgabat) never passed any public examinations and brought ecological damage to the country.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ TIHR Newsletter, 3 March 2005.

⁴⁸ “Turkmen leader closes hospitals,” *BBC*, 1 March 2005

⁴⁹ TIHR Newsletter, 3 March 2005.

⁵⁰ See IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region. Report 2002 (Events of 2001)*, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=1782

⁵¹ See THI, *Education in Turkmenistan* (2004), available at http://www.livejournal.com/users/turkmen_init/