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**Contribution by Reporters Without Borders (RSF),
a non-governmental organization with special consultative status,
on press freedom and freedom of information in Turkmenistan**

An international Paris-based NGO that has promoted media freedom worldwide since 1985, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has consultative status with the United Nations. Its bureaux in ten cities and its network of correspondents in 130 countries enable it to closely monitor freedom of information and expression all over the world.

Overview of the press freedom situation: a highly repressive environment

The situation of press freedom in Turkmenistan has remained a source of great concern since the 16th session of the Universal Periodic Review in 2013, as the country is ranked 178th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2017 World Press Freedom Index. Turkmenistan is still one of the most repressive and self-isolated countries in the world, and Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who has been ruling the country for more than a decade, is on the RSF list of "Predators of press freedom."

The State has maintained absolute control over the media and the Internet, of which only a completely expurgated version is made accessible to the Turkmen population. Growing economic difficulties and security concerns have resulted in a renewed crackdown in the past three years. Persecution of the remaining independent journalists has intensified, forcing several of them to stop working due to constant harassment. Journalists have also been arrested while their families are often subject to pressure from the authorities. None of the recommendations that Turkmenistan accepted during the 16th session of the UPR has been implemented as far as press freedom is concerned (112.62, 112.63, 112.64, 112.65, 113.89)

1. Increasing persecution of the remaining independent journalists

During the UPR's 16th session in 2013, Turkmenistan accepted a recommendation (113.88) that it should "take measures to ensure the right to freedom of expression (...) for human rights defenders, independent journalists and civil society activists and effectively combat intimidation and harassment against them." Another recommendation, also accepted by the Turkmen authorities, said "independent investigations into allegations of (...) violations of the rights of human rights defenders and independent journalists, including attacks against their lives and their freedom of movement" will be conducted and "necessary protection measures will be taken" (recommendation 113.70).

However, despite Turkmenistan's national legislation guaranteeing freedom of expression and prohibiting censorship (Media Act of December 2012), persecution of the remaining independent journalists has intensified in the past three years. Correspondents working clandestinely for media outlets based abroad have become the main targets.

In July 2017, **Soltan Achilova**, a 68-year-old journalist who works for *Radio Azatlyk* (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's* Turkmen service) received death threats and was the target of an attempted attack while on her way to cover Turkmenistan's "Day of Bicycles." She was already the victim of three physical attacks in November 2016.

That same month, her colleague **Rovshen Yazmuhamedov**, who was also a correspondent for *Radio Azatlyk*, was threatened with being made to serve the suspended jail sentence he was given in 2013. Six of *Radio Azatlyk's* nine correspondents had already been forced to stop their activities in 2015, following increased harassment from authorities. They included long-time correspondent **Osmankuly Hallyev**, who was interrogated and threatened. Several members of his family lost their jobs because of his work as a journalist.

2. Unlawful detention and harassment of journalists

Detention of journalists on trumped-up charges or for unknown reasons and violation of the right to a fair trial and especially the right to be represented by an attorney have persisted throughout the past few years. Relatives have also been subject to growing harassment by the authorities.

The case of freelance journalist **Saparmamed Nepeskuliev** is an emblematic one. A contributor to *RFE/RL's* Turkmen Service and *Alternative Turkmenistan News*, Nepeskuliev was held incommunicado for weeks after he disappeared on 7 July 2015 while visiting the Caspian Sea resort city of Avaza. His family was not informed about his whereabouts despite Turkmenistan's law requiring this within 72 hours. He was then tried secretly without being represented by a lawyer and was given a three-year jail sentence on a trumped-up drug charge. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has described his imprisonment as arbitrary.

His colleague **Khudayberdy Allashov**, also a correspondent for *Radio Azatlyk*, was arrested on 3 December 2016 along with his mother. Police raided their home, began beating him and seized a few packets of tobacco. This was later used as grounds for detaining Allashov and his mother for two months on the arbitrary charge of illegal possession of large quantities of chewing tobacco, a criminal offence in Turkmenistan. In February 2017, both were given a three-year suspended sentence.

Relatives of critical journalists are also being targeted and harassed. Surveillance cameras were installed around the family home of journalist **Rovshen Yazmuhamedov** following his arrest in May 2013. His relatives were unreachable for days after his detention, the phone line having been apparently disconnected. A reporter for *Radio Azatlyk*, Yazmuhamedov was held arbitrarily for unknown reasons for more than two weeks in the northeastern city of Turkmenabat. His detention is thought to be linked with his journalistic activities as he was writing mostly about social issues, which are often sensitive in Turkmenistan.

Harassment of family members also led to the death of **Chary Annamuradov's** brother. A dissident journalist who found asylum in Sweden in 2003 following persecution, Chary Annamuradov was arrested in Minsk in July 2016 in response to an extradition request from the Turkmen authorities on politically motivated fraud charges. During his detention, his brother Altymurad Annamuradov was

kidnapped by two unidentified men, severally beaten and questioned about Chary Annamuradov. He died four days later.

3. No access to independent information

During the UPR's 16th session in 2013, Turkmenistan accepted a recommendation (112.62) that the authorities should "ensure freedom of expression and access to information by ending the practice of interfering with access to the Internet and the practice of censorship in online and print media."

However, the Turkmen authorities have continued to maintain tight control over the media and the "Turkmenet," a completely expurgated version of the Internet that is the only form of online access available to the Turkmen population.

Foreign-based news websites, such as the sites of *Ferghana*, *Radio Azatlyk* and *Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, are blocked while all national media outlets are under the control of the authorities. The quasi-monopoly of the state-run operator TurkmenTelecom has in turn allowed a centralized censorship system to be put in place that is directly supervised by the government.

The censorship is so extreme that it often borders on the ridiculous. In 2013, for example, a vast operation was deployed to eliminate all visual, oral or written records of the president falling from a horse at the end of a race. In June 2016, mobile Internet networks were also blocked a day after an accidental explosion in an oil depot in the city of Turkmenbashi.

Access to foreign TV news coverage has become more and more difficult for the Turkmen population as the authorities have in recent years stepped up the removal of the satellite dishes on the pretext of giving the cities a face-lift.

Recommendations

In the light of these observations, RSF urges the Turkmen authorities to:

- Immediately release **Saparmamed Nepeskuliev** in response to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's opinion that he is being detained arbitrarily.
- Put an end to the harassment campaign against freelance journalists and correspondents and ensure that their safety is guaranteed. Allowing journalists to exercise their right to freedom of expression peacefully is one of Turkmenistan's many obligations as a party to the ICCPR.
- Put an end to the harassment of journalists' relatives.
- Unblock foreign media websites and ensure that the Media Act of December 2012, which prohibits censorship and guarantees media freedom, is fully respected and implemented.
- Put an end to the campaign of removing satellite dishes and allow the Turkmen population to access foreign TV news coverage.

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