

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/turkmenistan>

Annual reports

Events of 2021

People wearing protective face masks, used as a preventive measure against the spread of Covid-19, COVID-19), in a bus in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. The Turkmen government denies the existence of any Covid-19 cases in Turkmenistan. July 15, 2020.

2020 REUTERS/Vyacheslav Sarkisyan

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Turkmenistan continued to be one of the worlds most oppressive and closed countries, ruled by authoritarian President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, his relatives, and associates. Authorities failed to address the impact of the countrys multi-year economic crisis on peoples food security and other basic needs.

The country remained among the few countries without a single registered Covid-19 case, despite credible reports clearly indicating otherwise. Authorities tightly control access to information, severely restrict media and religious freedoms, and allow no independent monitoring groups. Independent activists, including in exile, and their relatives were subject to government reprisals. Dozens of people remained victims of enforced disappearance. The government continued to interfere with peoples right to freedom of movement.

Despite authorities refusal to acknowledge Covid-19 cases in Turkmenistan, media outlets reported that hospitals are overwhelmed with patients with Covid-19 symptoms and there is a serious shortage of drugs to treat them. The number of Covid-19 deaths is unknown. Turkmen.news, a Netherlands-based outlet, created an online memorial to 55 people who died of Covid-19 like symptoms. The government-imposed lockdowns in some districts in August, expanded them in September throughout the country, and continued to threaten and jail people for openly demanding access to information about the spread of Covid-19. The authorities continued to require the burning of harmala plants in such public spaces as hospitals, shops, and the like, alleging, with no evidence, that the smoke has disinfecting properties.

Meanwhile, the government has taken measures to prevent Covid-19. Since July, vaccination is mandatory for all citizens above 18, except those who have specified medical contraindications, such as a history of anaphylaxis, or are pregnant.

Although no formal punishment was introduced for refusing vaccination, authorities havethreatened people who refuse vaccination with criminal charges for malicious refusal of treatment for an infectious disease, which is punishable by a maximum two-year prison term, higher if there are aggravating circumstances. In August, Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen-language service of the US government-funded Radio Liberty, reported that authorities in Lebap region fined people and threatened to withhold pensions for refusing to be vaccinated. Police fined people for not wearing masks, and unvaccinated civil servants were threatened with dismissal. Authorities occasionally imposed internal travel bans on people above 50 and restrictions on prison visits, parcels and correspondence, citing Covid-19 related quarantine measures. As of August 29, 52 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated. No data has been reported since then.

Turkmen authorities did not acknowledge a rise in poverty due to the pandemic and the shrinking availability of affordable food in the

country and failed to ensure an adequate standard of living and the right to food to economically vulnerable groups.

In some parts of the country, state-subsidized food staples were unavailable for months at a time. Meanwhile, the demand for state-subsidized food has increased. Authorities threatened and detained shoppers who vented their frustration in long lines outside supermarkets.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, a Vienna-based group, found the authorities policy of delivering subsidized foods to households, introduced in spring 2021, proved inefficient, leaving some households with no subsidized food. In-store purchases of subsidized food were subject to heavily staggered schedules.

The government does not allow any vestige of independent civil society expression. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are prohibited unless registered, and the registration procedure is burdensome. International human rights NGOs are denied access. Activists face a constant threat of government reprisal. Turkmen authorities force dissidents and activists in exile into silence, including by targeting their relatives.

In September 2020, Nurgeldy Halykov, 26, a freelance correspondent with the independent Turkmen.news, was sentenced to a four-year prison term on fabricated fraud charges. Police arrested Halykov in July 2020, shortly after Turkmen.news published a photo it received from him of the World Health Organization's (WHO) delegation during its 2020 Covid-19-related visit to Turkmenistan.

Activist Murad Dushemov was fined and jailed in two separate incidents after publicly questioning the authorities claim about the absence of Covid-19 in Turkmenistan and refusing to comply with Covid-19 related rules. He received a four-year prison term on trumped up extortion and battery charges stemming from an alleged fight with a cellmate during his 15-day jail sentence, which activists said was a provocation.

Turkmen authorities repeatedly retaliated against the Turkmenistan-based relatives of Turkmens living abroad who criticize the government. In May, security officials questioned and threatened a 14-year-old boy in retaliation for the outspoken views of his uncle, Rozybai Jumamuradov, a Turkmen activist in exile. In March, unidentified people called the boys family and threatened to kill them unless they ceased communicating with Jumamuradov. The Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF), a human rights organization in exile, and the Memorial Human Rights Center, an independent Russian group, reported in July that Turkmen authorities repeatedly harassed and intimidated Aziza Khemraeva in retaliation for the activities of her brother based in Turkey, who actively criticizes the Turkmen government online. In October, the two organizations reported more incidents of such harassment, including Turkmen security services pressuring Tazegul Ovezova to convince her son, a blogger living in Turkey, to end his activism.

On August 1 in Istanbul, Turkey, unknown individuals attacked a group of Turkmen migrant workers, preventing them from holding a rally at the Turkmen consulate there. Turkish police briefly detained about 10 Turkmen nationals who attempted to participate in the protest. Unidentified men beat and stabbed Aziz Mammedov, after he posted online a video of the attack. Three men lured blogger Farhad Durdyev into the consulate, where several people, including diplomats, beat and threatened him for several hours. Durdyev was released several hours later, after Turkish police intervened.

Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev, a lawyer, sentenced in September 2020 on trumped up charges to a six-year prison term for alleged connections with activists of the protest movement abroad remained imprisoned. Mansur Mengelov, an activist for Baloch minority rights, continued to serve his 22-year prison term, handed down in 2012, on bogus narcotics charges.

The fate and whereabouts of Omriuzak Omarkulyev, who had created an informal Turkmen students club in Turkey, remain unclear. In 2018 Omarkulyev went missing after authorities had lured him into returning to Turkmenistan and then banned him from returning to Turkey. The authorities claimed he was performing his obligatory military service, but independent sources reported that he was sentenced to 20 years in prison on unknown charges. In October, a government spokesperson publicly stated that Omarkulyev finished his military service and was living with his family. However, this could not be independently confirmed.

Turkmenistan has one of the worlds worst media freedom records. All print and electronic media are tightly controlled or owned by the state. Authorities routinely suppress independent voices and severely retaliate against Turkmen nationals who report for foreign outlets.

Internet access in Turkmenistan is highly censored. Many websites and applications are blocked. Authorities closely monitor all means of communication. Although Turkmen law does not explicitly ban Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), it bans uncertified encryption programs and criminalizes deliberately providing illegal services that provide technical programs online, for which the maximum penalty is seven years in prison. The authorities systematically block VPNs and intimidate and penalize people who allegedly use them. Azatlyk reported in April that police in eastern Turkmenistan issued warnings to and fined at least two high school teachers because about a dozen of their students were allegedly suspected to have been using VPNs on their mobile phones.

In January police confiscated mobiles of 10th and 11th graders in one of Ashgabat schools, reportedly following security services orders to check their photo and video content, and websites accessed. Azatlyk reported that at least one parent was able to obtain the return of his childs smartphone after paying an administrative fine.

In May, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), an exiled group, and the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) reported that between December 2020 and March 2021 internet users were summoned, questioned, and intimidated by security services for using VPNs and in March authorities ramped up efforts to block VPN access.

In May, TIHR reported that its website was subject to distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attack.

Turkmen authorities impose arbitrary travel bans on various groups of people and violate peoples right to freedom of movement.

In July, Radio Azatlyk reported that authorities in one region orally ordered public sector workers to turn their passports over to migration authorities and stated they would not issue or renew passports for these workers.

The Turkmen government has not responded to a 2019 United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) request for information regarding the case of the Ruzimatov family, relatives of a former official who has emigrated. Authorities have banned the family from traveling abroad since 2003.

The governments continued refusal to renew expiring passports continued to deprive many Turkmen citizens living abroad of their right to freedom of movement and interfered with their ability to obtain legal status in host countries, exposing them to the risk of a range of human rights violations. Following June amendments to the migration law, authorities began extending the validity of passports with an expiration date of January 1, 2020, through December 30, 2022. The extension applies mainly to people stranded due to the Covid-19 pandemic and does not address the needs of many Turkmen emigrants whose passports have expired and who have no plans to return to Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan bans unregistered congregations or religious groups, and registration requirements are cumbersome. Unregistered activity is forbidden and punishable by administrative penalties and authorities often use pretexts to criminally prosecute people for their presumed religious affiliations or practices. The government censors all religious literature.

Forum 18, an independent religious freedom group, reported in May that 16 men, all Jehovahs Witnesses, jailed for conscientious objection, had been amnestied. Dozens of Muslims, including Bahrom Saparov, continue to serve long prison terms on politically motivated religious extremism charges related to their religious practice and affiliations.

In January 2021 police in Lebap region detained about 10 Muslims allegedly for following their [Muslim] faith too closely, forcibly shaved off one mans beard, forced him to drink alcohol, and fined him on unknown grounds. In a separate incident also in January, 10 other Muslims who had gathered to pray, were detained by police allegedly for violation of lockdown restrictions, although no lockdown restrictions were in place at the time.

Authorities continued to conceal the fate and whereabouts of dozens of people, who disappeared in Turkmen prisons following convictions on what appear to be politically motivated charges. The exact number of political prisoners remains unknown due to the lack of transparency in the justice system and closed nature of trials in sensitive cases. The government imprisons people who expose injustices, incompetence and corruption. Torture and ill-treatment in custody persist.

Dozens of prisoners who have been denied access to family and lawyers, remained victims of enforced disappearance or held incommunicado, following convictions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The international Prove They Are Alive campaign, which seeks to end enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, estimates that at least 120 people have been forcibly disappeared. The fate and whereabouts of at least nine disappeared persons whose terms expired or were scheduled to expire in 2021, remain unknown.

Azat Isakov went missing in Turkmenistan after Russian authorities returned him to Turkmenistan in October. Isakov, who had been living in Russia, actively criticized the Turkmen government and was presumed to have been taken into custody upon arrival in Turkmenistan. At time of writing, there was no information about his whereabouts.

In July, police arrested Khursanai Ismatullaeva, a doctor, one day after a human rights defender participating in a European Parliament (EP) panel discussed her unsuccessful efforts to get reinstated after being unfairly fired from her job. In August, a court sentenced her to nine years in prison on presumably bogus fraud charges.

Political dissident Gulgeldy Annaniazov, who should have been released in March 2019 after serving his full 11-year sentence on politically motivated charges, remains on a five-year term of forced internal exile. His health has significantly deteriorated.

Consensual same-sex conduct between men is a criminal offense under Turkmen law, punishable by a maximum two-year prison sentence. In September, according to Turkmen News, police in Turkmenabat detained approximately 20 men suspected of having sex with other men. In August, police in Turkmenabat detained a well-known barber and stylist in a similar raid and allegedly tried to compel him to name other men believed to be gay. As of end of October 2021 they remained in custody.

In July, the World Bank approved a US\$20 million loan to the Turkmen government for preparedness against the health and social risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. The loan is intended to, among other things, provid[e] COVID-19-related care to all citizens, including vulnerable population groups. There is no information available about how the bank will ensure people get Covid-19-related care while the authorities deny any Covid-19 infections in the country.

During its annual human rights dialogue with Turkmenistan in June, the European Union stressed the need for concrete improvements in human rights and the importance of the full independence of the Ombudsperson's office and called for strengthened cooperation with the United Nations to tackle enforced disappearances. Ratification of a bilateral partnership and cooperation agreement between the EU and Turkmenistan remains pending since 2010 due to Turkmenistans poor human rights record.

The US State Department redesignated Turkmenistan as a country of particular concern for religious freedom. In June, the US State Departments Trafficking in Persons Report re-designated Turkmenistan a Tier 3 country, for its insufficient efforts to eliminate human trafficking. A June statement by the US mission to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) expressed concerns about the severe restrictions of human rights and fundamental freedoms and about enforced disappearances.

Despite a standing invitation of the Turkmen government since 2018 to all UN special procedures to visit the country, 15 United Nations special procedures have requested, but have not been granted, access to the country.

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