

Human Rights Watch

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Turkmen authorities should immediately release Gulgeldy Annaniazov, a dissident arrested upon his return home from exile abroad, Human Rights Watch said today. Annaniazov was arrested on June 24, 2008, as officials from Turkmenistan and the European Union met in the capital, Ashgabat, to discuss human rights.

Authorities arrested Annaniazov at his parents home in Ashgabat. Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, a human rights group based in Bulgaria, reported that three men, presumed to be security service agents, entered the home and arrested Annaniazov without presenting a warrant or giving the reasons for his arrest. They also refused to tell Annaniazovs family where he would be detained.

If the Turkmen authorities feel free to arrest a dissident like Annaniazov on the same day as their human rights dialogue with the EU, they clearly arent serious about reform,said Maria Lisitsyna, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. The EU should demand Annaniazovs immediate release and warn Turkmenistan that it will pay a price for politically motivated arrests.

Annaniazov is a former political prisoner who has lived in exile in Norway since 2002, where he holds refugee status. He almost died when he was imprisoned in Turkmenistan. Annaniazov recently announced his decision to return to Turkmenistan in order to help his fatherland to improve its education and public health systems. In late May 2008 he traveled to Kazakhstan to meet with officials of the Turkmen government and seek permission to enter the country. The exact date and circumstances of his actual entry into Turkmenistan in June 2008 are unknown.

Human Rights Watch called on the EU and other key partners of Turkmenistan, including the United States, to make clear that politically motivated arrests of this kind are unacceptable, and to intervene at the highest levels to secure Annaniazovs immediate release.

Background

Gulgeldy Annaniazov was one of the dissident leaders known as the Ashgabat Eight. This group of men was arrested July 12, 1995, in connection with a peaceful demonstration calling for expanded democratic reform in Turkmenistan. Police violently disbanded the peaceful protest and authorities sentenced Annaniazov and his colleagues to prison terms ranging up to 15 years. The severe conditions in Turkmen state custody took their toll on the prisoners. In 1998, a fellow prisoner reported that Annaniazovs condition had deteriorated dramatically, and he could barely walk or speak. One of his co-defendants, Charymurat Gurov, died in prison, apparently as a result of torture. Annaniazov was released under a presidential amnesty decree in January 1999. Following his release, Annaniazov fled to Kazakhstan but was arrested when trying to cross the border into Russia. In the face of intense international pressure, Kazakhstan did not extradite Annaniazov, who was granted refugee status and resettled in Norway in 2002.

Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive and authoritarian countries in the world. Following the death of Turkmenistans president-for-life Saparmurat Niazov in December 2006, the government led by Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov is ending the self-imposed international isolation of the Niazov era and has begun to reverse some of the most ruinous social policies. The reforms undertaken to date, however, have not fundamentally changed Turkmenistans abysmal human rights record. In a [November 2007 briefing paper](#), Human Rights Watch documented the draconian restrictions on freedom of expression, association, movement, religion and belief prevailing in the country.

After two decades of complete intolerance to any dissent and widespread abuse of the criminal justice system for governmental purges, hundreds and possibly thousands of people have either served or continue to serve lengthy prison terms as a result of closed, unfair trials. Berdymukhamedovs government has released approximately two dozen people believed to have been imprisoned for political reasons, but has not proposed a process for reviewing all such cases. Equally worrisome, it has recently arrested at least one social activist, Valery Pal, on what appear to be politically motivated grounds.

In a [submission to the European Union](#) in advance of its human rights dialogue with Turkmenistan, Human Rights Watch called on the EU to urge the Turkmen government to implement genuine human rights reforms, including the release of all political prisoners, and a thorough review of past cases. The release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience is also among the benchmarks the European Parliament has formulated for EU engagement with Turkmenistan.

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