

To: Health Professionals
From: Health and Human Rights Team
Date: 24 March 2005

MEDICAL ACTION

Turkmenistan: President announces large-scale closure of hospitals

According to recent press reports, at a meeting with newly appointed officials of some regional and district administrations on 28 February, President Saparmurad Niyazov announced that all hospitals apart from those in the capital should be closed, saying that they were not needed as any citizens requiring health care could travel to Ashgabat, the capital city, and obtain treatment there.

The proposal, which would entail long journeys¹ – in some cases of hundreds of kilometres, which many could not afford – for the sick and the ill, or for those who have suffered a serious accident or emergency health condition has been criticized by the international health community, including Physicians for Human Rights and the International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations², as well as other organizations including Human Rights Watch.

In the absence of a transparent and independent legislative branch of power, presidential statements have in the past in many cases been sufficient to result in ad hoc enforcement.

Background

Human rights abuses in Turkmenistan remain widespread and include violations of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights.

Freedoms of expression and belief are severely curtailed, civil society activists and political dissidents, as well as their families, and religious minorities continue to face harassment and imprisonment or are forced into exile; citizens do not have freedom of assembly and association; the judiciary is not independent; perpetrators of torture enjoy impunity; according to reports, prison conditions fall far short of international standards; freedom of movement is severely curtailed; government measures have led to a severe deterioration of the education system, including through a heavy emphasis on state ideology and the President's personality cult in the school curriculum. The authorities have forcibly

¹ Turkmenistan has a territory of nearly 500,000 square kilometres, considerably larger than Germany. According to reports, about 90 per-cent of the population live outside of Ashgabat.

² See the IFHHRO's Open Letter to President Niyazov here: <http://www.ifhro.org/files/turkmenistanltr.pdf>

evicted people from their homes for government architectural projects or to implement apparently arbitrary presidential decisions, with residents reportedly receiving little or no compensation.

Key to the failure to address impunity or counter the widespread abuse of human rights is the domination by President-for-life Saparmurad Niyazov of all aspects of life in the country, and the personality cult the self-proclaimed *Turkmenbashi* (Father of all Turkmen) has surrounded himself with.³

According to reports, in recent years under President Niyazov, Turkmenistan's health care system has been subjected to drastic cutbacks, with 15,000 health care workers laid off and their jobs filled by soldiers. As people increasingly have to pay for a large range of medical treatments, health care has become financially inaccessible to most people.

Although President Niyazov's announcement is yet to be implemented, AI is alarmed that, if implemented, it would have a detrimental effect on public health.

The Director of the Turkmenistan Project of the Open Society Institute is reported to have criticized the announced changes in the health system, saying: "If this verbal order is actually implemented it will literally mean a death sentence for people with very serious diseases."

According to reports, the World Health Organization ranks Turkmenistan 168th out of nearly 200 countries in terms of physicians per capita, and 133rd in terms of total physicians, according to the latest available figures. It also places Turkmenistan last among 52 countries studied in terms of "healthy life expectancy at age 60," and puts the country near the bottom in terms of total expenditure on health as a portion of gross domestic product.

In his statement proposing the large-scale closure of hospitals, President Niyazov also reportedly proposed a large-scale closure of public libraries including all libraries in rural communities.

Amnesty International notes that Turkmenistan has large oil and gas reserves from which the government receives high revenues.

International standards

AI believes that the closure of hospitals on the scale as suggested by President Niyazov would be in clear violation of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Turkmenistan is a state party. The Convention states that everyone has the right to the "highest attainable standard of health" (Article 12) and that provision of basic medical infrastructure is an important component of a government's obligations under the Covenant.

Recommended Actions

1 Letter-writing

Please write letters in Turkmen, Russian (if using Russian, it is important that you apologize for using it and explain that you do not know Turkmen) or English, on headed paper if you use this in your profession, to President Niyazov along the following lines:

- Introduce yourself as a health professional concerned with human rights/member of AI
- Express concern at reports about his announcement of a large-scale closure of hospitals across the country except for hospitals in the capital Ashgabat, which

³ For more in-depth information concerning the situation in Turkmenistan see AI's report: *Turkmenistan: Clampdown on dissent. A background briefing* (AI Index: EUR 61/015/2003 – shortly to be updated)

would mean that many ill people would be unable to travel to seek appropriate health care

- State that such a measure would be contrary to Turkmenistan's obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to ensure that everyone has the right to the highest attainable standard of health
- Urge him to revoke his proposal and to ensure that Turkmenistan's health care system conforms to international standards, is easily accessible and available to all, and that health care is provided by properly trained health professionals
- Invite a response

2 Outreach

Send a copy of your letter (s) to your national medical association and ask them to contact President Niyazov to express concern.

3 Publicity

Write a letter to your national medical journal urging other health professionals to write and express concern to the President of Turkmenistan.

Addresses:

President of Turkmenistan:

Saparmurad Ataevich **NIYAZOV**:
Prezident Turkmenistana
Apparat Prezidenta
744000 Ashgabat
TURKMENISTAN
Fax: + 993 12 35 51 12

Copies to:

Minister of Health and Medical Industry:

Gurbanguly Myalikgulievich **BERDIMUKHAMEDOV**
Ministr zdravookhraneniya i meditsinskoi promyshlennosti
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Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan:

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Ministr inostrannykh del
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Paul Hunt, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health:

Paul Hunt
Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health
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United Nations Office at Geneva
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1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Foreign Minister in your own country, with a cover letter asking him/her to bring this matter to the attention of your government.

Please send any replies received to the health rights team at the IS: medical@amnesty.org

Thank you for any appeals you are able to send.