

The Turkmen Carthagen. “Turkmenbashi” razed to the ground the Darvaza village).
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FORCED DISPLACEMENT OF THE DARVAZA RESIDENTS

According to reports from Turkmenistan, at the end of June – beginning of July 2004, President Nijazov issued a decree, following which the residents of the village of Darvaza (Derveze), situated 200 km to the north of [capital] Ashgabad, were forcefully displaced to other villages, and the village destroyed. Darvaza (with a population of 3000), administratively was part of Ashgabad province (*etrap*), Ahalsk region (*velayat*). The village bordered on the Dashoguz *velayat*, with only one motorway passing through it, connecting the capital with the northern part of the country. The main source of income of its residents was sheep and camel breeding, as well as their private roadside cafeterias.

At the beginning of June, when flying over Darvaza to Dashoguz [in his jet], President Nijazov commented on an unattractive appearance of residential houses and roadside buildings and ordered the village to be destroyed. About three weeks later, some 200 soldiers and policemen arrived in Darvaza and announced the forced displacement of its residents. A driver, working on the Ashgabad-Dashoguz motorway, says: “We were given one hour to pack our belongings. Soldiers pulled up over the trucks heading for Ashgabad and loaded them with household wares and other belongings. Nobody even tried to protest, knowing that it was useless”.

The displaced persons were given the following choices for their new places of residence along the motorway: the village of Bokurdak (108 km north of Ashgabad), the village of Erbent and some areas nearer the capital. The displaced persons were not provided with any housing. Authorities promised to allot *melleks* (plots of land) to them, but they have not kept their promise so far. Many of the displaced persons live in *yurtas* (nomad’s tents) at present.

Displacement completed, the Darvaza village was demolished by bulldozers. Obviously, the authorities were worried about the possibility of former residents returning to their native place. According to one witness, “even the recently built mosque was destroyed”.

Only a police checkpoint on the border of two *velayats* is now left of what used to be the village of Darvaza.

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The author’s name is not disclosed for security reasons.

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