



Briefing paper for EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue: Key human rights concerns in Turkmenistan

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TIHR - Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights is the successor organisation of the Helsinki Group of Turkmenistan and was registered as an independent association in Vienna (Austria) in November 2004. Through a network of local experts and activists inside Turkmenistan, TIHR monitors and reports on the human rights situation in this country. It also disseminates independent news, comments and analysis from and about Turkmenistan.

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INTRODUCTION

The human rights situation in Turkmenistan remains highly repressive and as previously, the country features at the bottom of international freedom rankings, such as Freedom House's Freedom in the World survey (which again [included](#) Turkmenistan among "the worst of the worst" in 2023 with lower ratings given only to Syria, South Sudan and Tibet) and Reporters without Borders' Press Freedom Index (which [ranked](#) Turkmenistan on place 176 out of 180 in 2023).

Hopes for real human rights improvements following the change of president in March 2022 have not realised, but similar patterns of repression as those seen under ex-President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has continued since his son, Serdar Berdymukhamedov took office. In addition, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has retained significant influence after stepping down from the presidency. His influence grew further in January 2023, when the People's Council headed by him was transformed from being the upper house of parliament into a separate institution designated as the highest body of power in the country. The ex-president was also granted the title of "National Leader of the Turkmen People". These developments further reinforced the concentration of power in the hands of the Berdymukhamedov family. Parliamentary elections to the new unicameral parliament held in March 2023 were unfree and unfair similar to all previous elections held in the country.

As described in more detail below in this briefing paper, fundamental rights and freedoms continue to be systematically violated in the country. Key issues of concern are: excessive state control of access to information and wide-ranging internet censorship; persecution of critical voices both at home and abroad, including through the imprisonment of individuals in retaliation for their civic engagement and the pursuit of the forcible return of Turkey-based activists; lack of operating space for truly independent civil society organisations; suppression of spontaneous protests and forcible mobilisation of citizens for state-organised mass events; ongoing problems of arbitrary detention, unfair trials, torture and enforced disappearances; and violations of women's rights.

We urge the EU to raise the issues and individual cases covered in this briefing paper with the Turkmenistani government during the Human Rights Dialogue. When doing so, the EU should specifically call on the government to take effective measures to implement the recommendations it received in connection with the UN Human Rights Committee's review of Turkmenistan's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in March 2023, as well as the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Turkmenistan in November 2023. Also, as the ratification of the EU-Turkmenistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) again is being considered, we urge the EU to remind the Turkmenistani authorities that the ratification of this agreement requires genuine progress on the benchmarks, which the European Parliament set out as a condition for the approval of the PCA in its [resolution](#) from May 2019. These benchmarks include, among others, ensuring unhindered access to alternative sources of information; ending the persecution of independent journalists and civil society activists based in the country and abroad, as well as their family members; ending arbitrary travel bans and allowing free travel abroad of those prohibited from leaving; acknowledging the existence of political prisoners and ending

practices of secrete detentions and torture; and ensuring respect for the peaceful and legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression association and assembly.

RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION

As previously, all media operating in Turkmenistan are subjected to close state control. At the same time, the authorities restrict access to information from alternative sources of information, in particular on the internet.

Internet connections remain slow and expensive in Turkmenistan. The state-owned Turkmen Telecom, the monopoly provider of broadband internet access, [announced](#) that it was increasing the speed of the internet connections it offers as of March 2023. Thus, the minimum speed of its connections was [increased](#) from 256 kbps to 1 Mbps and the maximum speed from 2 to 6 Mbps. The new maximum speed is still low compared to global standards. For example, in September 2023, the average broadband download speed worldwide was 85 Mbps (or 14 times the new maximum speed in Turkmenistan) according to the [Speedtest Global Index](#). The new faster connections announced by the state company also came at [increased costs](#). The monthly costs increased from 100 to 150 manat (around 38 EUR at the official exchange rate) for internet connections at the minimum speed and from 200 to 280 manat (around 70 EUR) for connections at the maximum speed. These rates constitute a significant expense for customers given the income level in the country, where the official minimum monthly salary was [set at](#) 1160 manat (around 290 EUR) for 2023.

Moreover, since spring 2023, there have been reports about reoccurring disruptions in internet access and problems with slower than usual internet connections. For example, as reported by TIHR, in June 2023, internet traffic in the country [dropped](#) to almost zero for several days in connection with the opening of Arkadag, a new so-called smart city named in honour of ex-president Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov (who is also known as “Arkadag” or “the Protector”). This drop in traffic was documented by data from CloudFlare Radar, a service that tracks internet usage patterns worldwide. Internet traffic remained at a lower level than usual in Turkmenistan in the weeks following the opening of Arkadag.

In addition to problems with speed and affordability, internet access is also heavily restricted in Turkmenistan and a large number of social media networks, messenger apps, news sites and other online resources have been arbitrarily blocked. A large-scale academic study carried out by a team of computer scientists from leading US universities in 2021-2022 [documented](#) the blocking of over 120,000 domains in the country. Commenting on the findings for an article published by the Global Voices, one of the researchers involved in the study [said](#) that the authorities in Turkmenistan “block way more than people may have thought before”, using different blocking lists and rules. He noted that the scale of internet censorship in Turkmenistan is comparable to that in China, where 300,000 domains were found to be blocked.

According to the Netherlands-based Turkmen News, the number of blocked sites has [continued to increase](#) in recent months, with as many as three quarters of all IP addresses existing in the world having been blocked in the country according to its information.

In addition to blocking internet resources, the Turkmenistani authorities seek to prevent the use of VPN services to access blocked sites, including by intimidating and harassing both technical experts who install VPN applications on clients' devices and people who use VPN services. For example, in October 2023, a technical expert was reportedly [detained](#) in the capital Ashgabat and sentenced to 15 days' arrest and a fine of 15 000 manat for installing VPN services. It was not clear under which legal provisions the penalty was imposed. Internet users have also experienced difficulties in accessing VPN services due to slow and unstable internet connections. In addition, in August 2023, it was reported that IMO - the only messenger application not blocked in the country - had [stopped working](#) due to low internet speed.

Bloggers have reportedly been [summoned](#) by local officials and police in several regions of the country and instructed to only publish materials that paint a positive picture of the situation in the country and warned that posting, liking or commenting on any content critical of the authorities could be construed as "anti-government activity" and result in negative consequences, including imprisonment.

In December 2022, Turkmenistan's state media [reported](#) that a government working commission had been established to develop a "Concept for the formation of a national digital network, not linked to the internet". Our organisations have not received any additional information about the work of this commission, but we remain concerned that the authorities might seek to introduce a national state-controlled network for the purpose of further restricting internet use in the country.

There have also been [reports](#) about new attempts by the authorities to control and restrict access to foreign satellite TV channels.

When reviewing Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee [stated](#) that it was "deeply concerned about the absence of uncensored and unhindered access to various sources of information, including disproportionate limitations on online content and social networks" and called on the authorities to comply with its obligations under article 19 of the Covenant in this regard. During the UPR of Turkmenistan in November 2023, Turkmenistan received numerous recommendations on improving access to information, including by ensuring unhindered and uncensored internet access for all.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- In accordance with the recommendations received in the context of the Human Rights Committee and UPR reviews, take effective measures to improve access to information, including from sources providing information alternative to that of the authorities.
- Promote internet access, speed and affordability in the country, and safeguard residents' freedom to seek, receive and impart information through the global internet.

- Stop the practice of arbitrarily restricting access to internet resources in the country and ensure that any measure taken to block access to internet resources meets the strict requirements of necessity, proportionality and legality set out by international human rights law.
- Refrain from intimidating and harassing those who install and use censorship circumvention tools to access internet resources that have been arbitrarily blocked.

PERSECUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES AT HOME AND ABROAD

Politically motivated persecution

The Turkmenistani authorities continue to suppress dissent, targeting critical voices both at home and abroad. It is of particular concern that the authorities continue to use politically motivated imprisonment as a tool of retaliation against those who publicly criticise the authorities, stand up for their rights and engage with like-minded people. Trials in politically motivated cases are typically held behind closed doors, without access to a lawyer of their own choice for the defendants and in violation of other basic fair trial guarantees. Given the closed nature of the country's justice and prison systems, the full scale of this practice is not known.

Shortly after last year's EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue, doctor Khursanai Ismatullaeva and lawyer Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev, whose cases IPHR and TIHR had raised together with other NGOs, were pardoned and released from prison where they had been serving prison sentences imposed on charges believed to be politically motivated. This was a welcome development. **However, others imprisoned in apparent in retaliation for their peaceful and legitimate civic and journalistic engagement are still behind bars in Turkmenistan. Among them are the following individuals, whose releases we urge the EU to insist on, in follow-up to the recommendations issued by international human rights bodies and pledges made by the authorities to consider this issue:**

- Journalist **Nurgeldy Khalykov** who was arrested and **handed** a four-year prison sentence on fraud charges in September 2020, allegedly based on a complaint that he had failed to repay a private debt. His arrest came after he shared a photo of a WHO delegation visiting Turkmenistan in summer 2020 with the Netherlands-based media and human rights organisation Turkmen News and the authorities found out about his cooperation with this organisation. In an **appeal** made public in May 2023, Khalykov and three co-defendants with whom he is serving his sentence in a prison facility in Lebap region stated that they have been unlawfully imprisoned, subjected to physical and psychological pressure, and denied the right to meetings and phone calls with relatives while in prison. In addition to human rights NGOs, UN experts have also raised concerns about Khalykov's case. During the review of Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee called for Khalykov's release, and **this call was included in the [concluding observations](#) from the review.** During its interactive dialogue with the Committee, the government delegation **stated that it would "consider" the issue of Khalykov's release.** Earlier, in a communication from February 2021, several UN special procedures **criticised**

the “allegedly meritless charges, judicial harassment and seemingly arbitrary detention” facing Khalykov.

- Civil society activist **Murat Dushemov** was [sentenced](#) to four years in prison on extortion and other charges in August 2021. He was criminally charged after criticising the authorities online and attempting to challenge Covid-19 preventive measures imposed in the country despite the government’s denial of the national outbreak. In one incident to which the charges were related, a doctor at an Ashgabat medical clinic [accused](#) Dushemov of extorting money in exchange for leaving unpublished a video of him requesting her to show official documentation based on which compulsory vaccinations against Covid-19 were carried out. In another incident, Dushemov was accused of allegedly attacking and injuring co-detainees when being locked up for 15 days because of his refusal to present a negative Coronavirus test at a police checkpoint for cars. Dushemov was a signatory to the same appeal as Nurgeldy Khalykov, which was made public in May 2023 (see above). At its review of Turkmenistan in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee also raised concerns about Dushemov’s case and [called for his release](#), which the government [said it would consider](#).
- Human rights activist **Mansur Mingelov** was [sentenced](#) to 22 years’ imprisonment on multiple charges in 2012 after exposing torture and ill-treatment of members of the ethnic Baloch minority. During more than a decade in prison, he has reportedly suffered from serious health problems, including as a result of beatings to which he allegedly was subjected when he was first detained. In September 2023, Turkmen News [reported](#) that Mingelov was in a serious condition due to bone tuberculosis, a form of tuberculosis that spreads beyond the lungs and affects the bones. In spite of this, he was being transferred back from the prison hospital where he had been treated to the colony where he is serving his sentence. When the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination examined Turkmenistan’s compliance with the corresponding convention in August 2023, its experts [raised concerns about Mingelov’s case](#). The Turkmenistani state delegation told the Committee that the authorities were “[considering](#)” [pardoning him](#) and would “[inform the Committee of its decision](#)”. Previously, the authorities [made a similar pledge](#) during the Human Rights Committee’s review of Turkmenistan’s implementation of the ICCPR in March 2023, when this Committee [called for Mingelov’s release](#).

Travel restrictions as a means of pressure

The authorities also use other tactics to put pressure on “inconvenient” individuals, such as in this recent case involving an independent journalist:

- Independent journalist **Soltan Achilova**, 74, was due to leave for Geneva, together with her daughter Maya Achilova, at a plane departing shortly after midnight on 17 November 2023. Achilova’s planned Geneva visit was [organised by](#) the Martin Ennals Foundation in follow-up to her [selection as a finalist](#) for the foundation’s prestigious human rights award in 2021. She had been engaged as a keynote speaker for the [University of Geneva’s Human Rights Week 2023](#) and was also planning to meet with representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, human rights defenders and students. However, border officials at the airport in

Ashgabat [did not allow](#) Achilova and her daughter through passport control, even though their documents were in order. Customs and border officials also treated the journalist in a humiliating manner and deliberately damaged her and her daughter's passports.

Soltan Achilova [told](#) TIHR, with which she cooperates, that airport officials singled her and her daughter out for lengthy and intrusive security checks. After scanning the two women and their luggage electronically several times, customs officials also manually inspected their belongings and conducted body searches, during which Soltan Achilova was stripped twice - a degrading and humiliating experience for her. Later, at passport control, the journalist watched as border officials wiped the pages of her and her daughter's using wet napkins - without explaining the reason - and then told them that their passports were not valid for travel. When the two women handed over their documents at the passport control, the passports were in good shape. No one remarked on any fault with their passports when they checked in for their flight and only a few days prior to their trip, the German embassy in Ashgabat issued visas in their passports. Border officials rejected Soltan Achilova's request to summon higher-level managers, claiming that they were all busy because of upcoming festivities in the capital.

A group of 10 human rights NGOs, including TIHR, IPHR, Human Rights Watch and others [issued a joint statement](#) in Soltan Achilova's support, saying that the authorities' move to bar her from travelling to Geneva was shameful and clearly aimed at preventing her from shedding light on the repressive human rights situation in the country. They called on the Turkmenistani authorities to reverse their actions, allow Achilova to freely travel abroad and stop harassing her because of her journalistic work. The Martin Ennals Foundation [pointed out](#) that the authorities' obstruction of her travel was "striking evidence of the lack of freedoms in the country" and "the bad faith with which the Turkmenistan government engages with the Human Rights Council". During the UPR of Turkmenistan's human rights record, held under the auspices of the Human Rights Council the week before Achilova was barred from travelling to Geneva, the Turkmenistani authorities had pledged to respect freedom of expression and ensure an enabling environment for journalists (for example, the authorities endorsed a recommendation made by Austria on this issue - see par. 6.59 of the UPR outcome report).

Soltan Achilova has reported on the situation in Turkmenistan for more than a decade. Through her photos and stories, she has covered issues such as food insecurity, forced and illegal evictions, lack of adequate healthcare, and discrimination of people with disabilities. She has repeatedly been subjected to intimidation and harassment, including surveillance, internet restrictions, [psychological pressure](#), and [physical attacks](#) carried out by perpetrators acting with impunity. She has also previously been [barred from leaving](#) the country on several occasions.

Forcible returns of activists based abroad

In their ongoing campaign against government critics, the Turkmenistani authorities have also gone after outspoken activists based abroad, above all in Turkey, including by seeking their detention and forcible return to Turkmenistan. In the last few months, several activists have been sent back from Turkey to Turkmenistan, despite the serious risk that they might be subjected to torture, ill-treatment and politically motivated arrest and prosecution upon return because of their previous public criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities.

- Blogger **Farhat Meimankulyiev** (also known as Durdyiev) was reportedly [detained](#) in Istanbul at the request of Turkmenistan's consulate on 19 May 2023 and [deported](#) to Turkmenistan the following day, allegedly because of a migration violation. His deportation gave rise to serious concerns that he might be arrested, prosecuted and tortured in retaliation for his vocal criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities on YouTube. Information obtained by the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF) [indicates](#) that he was indeed arrested, convicted and handed a lengthy prison sentence upon return. The blogger had also previously reported harassment, in particular in August 2021, when he was [arbitrarily detained](#) at the premises of Turkmenistan's consulate in Istanbul, ill-treated, and pressured to apologise for posting videos critical of the regime.
- According to information received by TIHR, civil society activists **Rovsen Klucev and Dovran Imamov** were [forcibly sent back](#) from Turkey to Turkmenistan in July and August 2023, respectively, after being detained for migration violations. This put them at a serious risk of persecution because of their criticism of Turkmenistani authorities on social media and their participation in anti-government protests. TIHR learned that Imamov was immediately detained by security service officials when arriving to Turkmenistan and placed in a detention facility in the city of Turkmenabat, where he was denied meetings with relatives. According to unconfirmed reports, both Imamov and Klucev faced trumped-up charges of fraud.
- THF reported that **Maksat Baymuradov**, who has taken part in online discussions on political issues in Turkmenistan and criticised the authorities at such forums, was [deported](#) from Turkey to Turkmenistan in September 2023. According to THF's sources, Baymuradov's Turkish visa had been annulled without warning prior to this. A lawyer working on the case told THF that the activist's deportation was carried out, although an appeal filed against the deportation decision had yet to be considered. The Turkish authorities claimed that Baymuradov had signed a document consenting to his deportation, but in a message to co-activists sent shortly before his deportation he denied having signed such a document and said that Turkish officials had indicated that he was being deported because of his criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities. In a similar vein as in the cases described above, Baymuradov's deportation exposed him to a real risk of persecution.
- According to TIHR's sources, on 17 October 2023, **Serdar Durdilyev** was [deported](#) from Turkey to Turkmenistan together with several dozen other Turkmenistani citizens. Durdilyev had previously been involved in the establishment of an association of Turkmenistani students in Turkey, whose leader Omruzak Omarkuliev was [barred from leaving](#) Turkmenistan after travelling to the country on official invitation in 2018 and subsequently was reported to have been arrested, imprisoned and to have [disappeared](#) within the prison system. Omarkuliev's case shows that Durdilyev is also at risk of persecution in Turkmenistan because of his engagement in the student association. When deported, Durdilyev had [been held](#) in detention since 6 September 2023. At the time of his detention, he had a valid residence permit but police told him that it had been annulled based on a decision "from relevant agencies". On the evening before Durdilyev's deportation, his lawyer was reportedly prevented from talking to him. At the time of writing, there had been no confirmed information about Durdilyev's fate upon return to Turkmenistan.

The recent deportations of Turkmenistani activists from Turkey have taken place in a context in which the Turkish authorities have stepped up efforts to track down and return “illegal” migrants lacking valid documents for residing in the country. However, the Turkish authorities have failed to comply with their obligation not to send anyone back to Turkmenistan in violation of the non-refoulement principle under international law, which [prohibits states](#) from deporting individuals when there are substantial grounds for believing that they would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations. Also, many Turkmenistani citizens residing in Turkey have been unable to renew their migration documents due to difficulties with renewing their Turkmenistani passports at the country’s diplomatic representations in Turkey. In addition, last year the Turkish authorities ended a previous visa-free regime for Turkmenistani citizens at the request of Turkmenistani authorities, and human rights defenders have [reported](#) about arbitrary actions taken by Turkish authorities to annul the visas of Turkmenistani migrants.

Developments in the following case have given rise to concerns about the possible forcible return of a Turkmenistani activist from Russia to Turkmenistan:

- **Malikberdi Allamyradov**, a Turkmenistani activist who has lived and studied in Russia for several years, has publicly criticised the policies of the Turkmenistani authorities on social media platforms, including on his YouTube [blog](#). He has particularly spoken out against the Turkmenistani government’s restrictive policies with respect to money transfers abroad, which have created difficulties for him and many others who study abroad and rely on subsidies from relatives in Turkmenistan. In February 2021, he attracted attention when staging a protest on these issues in the city of Elista, where he was enrolled at university, only to be [detained](#) by Russian police, questioned and warned of repercussions for allegedly violating the rules for holding assemblies. However, later a local court [acquitted](#) him of these charges. Allamyradov has reported facing pressure from Turkmenistani security services because of his civic engagement. In addition, his parents who live in Turkmenistan’s Mary region have repeatedly been subjected to intimidation by local authorities.

In October 2023, Allamyradov was reportedly warned that the Turkmenistani authorities would attempt to forcibly repatriate him from Russia to Turkmenistan. Following this warning, he changed his place of residence for security reasons. In a [video report](#) about Allamyradov, which the Turkmen RFE/RL service published on 28 November 2023, he also expressed concerns about his safety. According to information from his friends and co-activists, on 4 December 2023, he went missing from the village in the Moscow region, where he had been living and working. There were reportedly [signs](#) of a fight and blood stains in the place where he was staying, and it was not possible to [get in touch](#) with him. Given Allamyradov’s profile as an activist and critic of the Turkmenistani authorities, this gave rise to fears that he might have been abducted by Turkmenistani security services for the purpose of forcibly returning him to Turkmenistan, where he would be at a serious risk of politically motivated prosecution, imprisonment, torture and ill-treatment and disappearance within the prison system. In a [video clip](#) published on 12 December 2023, Allamurat Rakhimov, a Turkmenistani journalist who has had close contacts with Allamyradov, alleged that the latter has already been forcibly returned to Turkmenistan in an operation carried out by Turkmenistani security services in cooperation with Russian security

services. According to Rakhimov, the security services used Allamyradov's SIM card and drones to establish his location. Rakhimov also claimed that the security services were attempting to make it look like Allamyradov had voluntarily signed up to go to Ukraine and take part in Russia's warfare there. This report further reinforced concerns about Allamyradov's safety.

Persecution of former political prisoners

Former political prisoners have also continued to be subjected to intimidation and harassment following their release, such as in the following case:

- **Khudaiberdi Allashov**, a former correspondent for Radio *Azatlyk*, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), has continued to be subjected to intimidation and harassment following his release from detention in February 2017. In apparent retaliation for his journalistic work, Allashov was [arrested](#) by police together with his mother in the Dashoguz region in December 2016 and charged with the possession of chewing tobacco, which is an unlawful but commonly used substance in Turkmenistan. During their time in detention, Allashov and his mother were allegedly [subjected to torture and ill-treatment](#). In a development that appeared to be the result of international attention to the case, the journalist and his mother were [released from detention](#) in mid-February 2017 after being handed three-year suspended prison sentences by a local court. However, they remained under surveillance, and due to ongoing pressure by authorities, Allashov [stopped working](#) with Radio *Azatlyk* after his release. In spite of this, according to Radio *Azatlyk*, Allashov continued to face intimidation and harassment by law enforcement authorities, including by repeatedly being detained, questioned and ill-treated. His family members were also targeted.

In a recent development, as reported by the Turkmen RFE/RL service, a group of police officers burst into Allashov's home in Kunya-Urgench in the Dashoguz region on 1 December 2023, [forcibly detained](#) him and took him away in an unknown direction. For several days, his relatives did not know where he was held or on what grounds, giving rise to serious concerns about his well-being and security. According to [information from Turkmen News](#), it subsequently turned out that Allashov had been locked up for 15 days on charges of hooliganism reportedly related to an incident at a local health clinic, where he sought to insist on his right to treatment when denied it. According to the organisation, Allashov's wife and son were also summoned by police in connection with his arrest and scolded for "communicating with journalists". There are concerns that Allashov might face criminal charges in follow-up to the current administrative ones.

Intimidation of relatives of activists

In an ongoing practice, the Turkmenistani authorities have attempted to silence activists by targeting their relatives, who have been detained, questioned and warned of serious repercussions unless the activists stop criticising the authorities. In some cases, local authorities have even targeted children who are relatives of outspoken activists, such as in this case:

- In February 2023, **Dursoltan Taganova**, a Turkey-based activist who has a large followership on social media and is openly critical of the government, [reported](#) about intimidation and harassment of her 12-year-old son who lives in Turkmenistan. Taganova told THF that her son was called to the teachers' office in his school in the city of Turkmenabat, where two men believed to have been security service officials questioned him about his mother and attempted to recruit him as an informant to regularly provide updates about his mother and classmates. Taganova said that the incident, and subsequent threats by the leading teacher to "hand him over" to the officers who had questioned him if he does not comply, had caused her son great distress.

Exile-based human rights defender barred from travelling to Turkey

In a further illustration of how the Turkish authorities have contributed to targeting individuals who are inconvenient to the Turkmenistani authorities, as well-known exile-based human rights defender was prevented from entering Turkey and deported in November 2023:

- According to [information](#) from the Bulgaria-based Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF), its head **Tajigul Begmedova** was stopped and detained at the passport control at Istanbul airport on 21 November 2023. She was subsequently deported to Bulgaria on the grounds that she allegedly poses a "threat to national security" in Turkey and has been banned from entering the country for five years. Previously, in January 2022, Begmedova was also prevented from entering Turkey, when travelling by bus from Bulgaria, and informed about an entry ban issued against her. At that time, the ban was later overturned by court and she was again able to visit Turkey. However, according to customs officials, a new ban has now been issued against her. THF believes that the Turkish authorities' actions in relation to Begmedova are likely to have been based on a request by Turkmenistani authorities. Since its foundation in 2003, THF has been working to promote human rights in Turkmenistan. In recent years, it has also actively worked on addressing violations of the rights of Turkmenistani migrants and activists living in Turkey.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Stop persecuting citizens based in- and outside the country because of their criticism of the current situation in Turkmenistan and their contacts with like-minded individuals to discuss, exchange information and engage on issues of concern to them.
- Ensure that no one is criminally charged, declared wanted, arrested or imprisoned because of their expressions of discontent, civic engagement or contacts with foreign-based groups and activists; and promptly review any convictions handed down against citizens in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.
- As called for by the UN Human Rights Committee, promptly release Nurgeldy Khalykov, Murat Dushemov and Mansur Mingelov. As long as these individuals remain behind bars, the authorities should ensure that their treatment fully corresponds to international standards.

- Ensure that activists/bloggers who have been forcibly returned to the country from Turkey are not arrested, ill-treated, prosecuted or imprisoned in retaliation for their previous criticism of the authorities and their civic engagement on issues of concern to them in Turkmenistan, including Farhat Meimankulyiev, Rovsen Klucev, Dovran Imamov, Maksat Baymuradov and Serdar Durdulyev. The authorities should provide an update on the current whereabouts and situation of these individuals and provide assurances that they will be protected against persecution because of their peaceful and legitimate exercise of their freedoms of expression, association and assembly.
- Provide assurances for the safety of Malikberdi Allamyradov, disclose his whereabouts if known to them and ensure that he is not subjected to arbitrary detention, prosecution and imprisonment in retaliation for his civic engagement.
- Refrain from arbitrarily restricting travel abroad of journalists, civil society activists and others. Allow Soltan Achilova to freely travel abroad and stop harassing her because of her journalistic work.
- Disclose the exact whereabouts of Khudaiberdi Allashov, ensure his safety in detention and release him in the absence of any credible grounds for holding him. Also, stop pressuring him and his family members because of his previous journalistic work.
- Refrain from intimidating and harassing relatives of outspoken citizens, above all children.
- Refrain from attempts to obstruct the work of exile-based human rights defenders.

RESTRICTIONS ON THE OPERATIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The operation of civil society organisations (CSOs) continues to be seriously restricted in Turkmenistan. Although the government has [reported](#) making some changes to the 2014 Law on Public Associations to simplify the procedure for creating and registering associations, this law nevertheless provides for excessive restrictions on the freedom of association of CSOs and grants authorities wide powers to oversee their activities without adequate safeguards against abuse. It is compulsory for CSOs to obtain state registration in order to operate in the country and there are broad grounds on which associations may be closed down by court.

At the Human Rights Committee's review of Turkmenistan's implementation of the ICCPR in March 2023, the government delegation [provided information](#) on the number of public associations that currently are registered in the country. It stated that a total of 135 organisations are registered, out of which more than 40 percent (58) are sport associations, while the rest deal with economic, creative, scientific, ecological, disability and other issues. This is a very low number of public associations for a country which officially has more than 6 million residents. Also, as previously, no independent organisation working on human rights issues is registered or able to work openly in the country. In its concluding observations from the review of Turkmenistan, the Human Rights Committee [expressed concerns](#) about the apparent lack of registered CSOs working on human rights issues and called on the government to bring its legislation governing CSOs in line with the ICCPR and to ensure that such legislation is not used to control or infringe the operations of CSOs.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- As called for by the UN Human Rights Committee, bring the provisions of the Law on Public Associations into full compliance with international human rights standards.
- Ensure that all CSOs that so wish, including groups addressing human rights issues may obtain legal status in a fair and transparent process and carry out their activities without undue interference by authorities.
- Agree to meet and discuss human rights protection issues with representatives of independent Turkmenistani NGOs based abroad as well as independent international human rights NGOs.

VIOLATIONS OF THE FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The right to freedom of assembly continues to be seriously restricted in Turkmenistan. The 2015 Law on Mass Events allows for organising assemblies if the authorities are informed in advance and the venue is agreed with them. At the same time, the law grants wide discretion to local officials to refuse to permit assemblies if the proposed venue is deemed unsuitable. It also sets out that assemblies, as a rule, should be held in specifically designated venues, although it is unclear whether any such venues have been identified.

Spontaneous protests

In practice, public protests are an extremely rare occurrence in Turkmenistan because of the repressive climate in the country and the risk of persecution associated with any public criticism of the authorities. However, in some cases, residents hold spontaneous protests to express discontent about issues of concern to them and to demand action from the authorities. In recent months, there has been a growing number of such protests, which seems to indicate an increase in the level of discontent among residents because of difficulties related to the protracted economic crisis in the country, widespread corruption, and other problems facing them. The authorities typically seek to suppress spontaneous protests using tactics of, on the one hand, intimidation of participants (such as through detentions and threats) and, on the other hand, persuasion (by making certain concessions on the issues raised).

These are a few examples of recent spontaneous protests:

- As reported by the Turkmen service of RFE/RL, on 7 August 2023, hundreds of people – most of whom were women - gathered outside the mayor's office in the city of Turkmenbashi to [protest against the shortage of flour](#), oil and other basic food products sold at subsidised prices in state-run stores. They demanded to talk to the mayor about this issue but were told that he was away. However, the mayor finally appeared after the protesters stated that they would otherwise walk to Abaz, a resort located close to Turkmenbashi, to convey their concerns directly to the president who was on vacation in the resort at the time. The mayor promised the crowd to deal with the issue raised by them but also warned them the president's security service "might use arms" against them should they try to approach him.

- In May 2023, TIHR [learned about a case](#) in which a group of farmers from the Mary region travelled to Ashgabat to hand over a complaint about problems in the state-led cotton production to the presidential administration after previously submitting appeals to various state bodies to no avail. However, instead of being received by officials from the presidential administration, the farmers were reportedly detained by police and taken to a local police station where they were required to provide their contact information and warned that they might face criminal charges if they again attempt to gain access to the presidential administration. Following this, they were sent back home.
- According to TIHR's [information](#), on 28 April 2023, around 100 residents gathered outside the local administration in the Täze ýap agricultural community in the Kunya-Urgench district of Dashoguz region, expressing resentment that they had not been able to buy rationed amounts of flour and oil at state subsidised prices for March and April. Because of the deficit of basic food products, rationing has become common in state-run stores in the last few years. Later the same day, some 180 people gathered in the nearby agricultural community of Zaman to express similar demands and blocked the road leading to Kunya-Urgench to back up their demands. Police arrived to the place, but the protesters did not disperse until a group of district officials had shown up and promised to ensure that flour and oil were delivered to the communities.
- According to [information](#) from the Netherlands-based organisation Turkmen News, on 6 March 2023, a group of around 30 women gathered in front of the presidential palace in Ashgabat. They were hoping to be able to convey their concerns to the president on a number of issues, including the lack of effective measures by authorities to investigate and address criminal actions to which they and their relatives had been subjected. However, although the women were first promised that the prosecutor general would receive them (as the president was said to be busy), they were soon detained by police and taken to a local police station, where they were held for several hours, questioned and made to write explanatory statements. Finally, they were sent back to their homes in different parts of the country.

Forced mobilisation for state-organised events

The Turkmenistani authorities continue to mobilise public sector employees, students and other citizens for participation in state-organised mass events, used for state propaganda purposes, at the threat of dismissal, loss of benefits and other repercussions. The practice of forced mobilisation violates people's right to voluntary participation in assemblies, which is a key element of the right to freedom of assembly. In its concluding observations on Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR, issued in March 2023, the Human Rights Committee [reiterated](#) its concern about this practice.

Women are particularly affected by forcible mobilisation for state-organised mass events as women make up the majority of those working in the public sector. At the same time, the authorities have attempted to control women's appearance in the context of mass events as part of a broader trend of reinforced restrictions on women's rights. As [reported](#) by the Turkmen service of RFE/RL, at meeting held in the city of Turkmenabat in early 2023 to discuss state-organised mass events planned for the year, local officials announced new requirements according to which women participating in mass events were

to wear long national-style dresses and headscarves and only women below the age of 40 were to be mobilised.

One example of forced mass mobilisation was seen in connection with the [grand opening](#) of the new Arkadag city, a so-called “smart” city featuring innovative solutions which reportedly cost several billion USD to build and has been named in honour of ex-President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov. For more than two weeks before the opening, held on the ex-president’s birthday on 29 June 2023, public sector employees and students from different parts of the country were [made to participate](#) in rehearsals for the celebrations for several hours a day in the hot sun, when the temperature was as high as 40 degrees Celsius. According to Radio Azatlyk’s information, this [resulted](#) in many cases of participants losing consciousness. At the same time, doctors were reportedly ordered to help all those requiring medical assistance on spot, with ambulances standing ready at the rehearsal sites, and no one was allowed to skip the rehearsals for health reasons. Arkadag is a so-called “smart” city featuring innovative solutions, which reportedly cost several billion USD to build.

In another example, public employees and students were also mobilised for week-long rehearsals ahead of the Independence Day celebrations on 27 September 2023. As reported by TIHR, starting in late August, state employees in the capital Ashgabat were [made to take part](#) in several-hour long rehearsals at the Dagdan stadium after the end of their work day. Students engaged for the celebrations were [warned](#) not to complain about the organisation of them. At least some of those mobilised for the Independence Day celebrations were [required](#) to use their own funds to pay for costumes, which they needed for the event.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Safeguard the right of residents to freely assemble on issues of concern to them, including by holding peaceful spontaneous protests to express their grievances without facing intimidation, detention or other repercussions.
- As called for by the UN Human Rights Committee, end the practice of forcibly mobilising residents for state-organised mass events, and ensure that participation in such events is voluntary. As long as the practice continues, take adequate measures to protect the health and well-being of participants, such as by providing them with water and food and opportunities to rest and visit the bathroom and refrain from enforcing gender-discriminatory restrictions on women in this context.

PROBLEMS OF ARBITRARY DETENTION, TORTURE, DISAPPEARANCES AND HARSH PRISON CONDITIONS

As previously, the judiciary is heavily dependent on the executive, and the pattern of arbitrary detention, prosecution and imprisonment of individuals for their legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms continues in Turkmenistan (see more in the chapter on persecution of civil society representatives). Trials in such cases

are typically held behind closed doors, without access to a lawyer of their own choice for the defendants and in violation of other basic fair trial guarantees.

Given the closed nature of the country's detention facilities, it is very difficult to obtain information about the problem of torture. However, available information, in particular reports from former detainees indicate that torture and ill-treatment remain widespread. Also, while it is welcome that the prohibition on torture included in the Criminal Code was strengthened in 2022 (article 201 of the Criminal Code), there are serious concerns about its application in practice and the lack of effective measures to investigate allegations of abusive treatment and hold the perpetrators accountable.

The lack of independent and effective monitoring of detention facilities remains a key problem. Turkmenistan has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) or established an independent national preventive mechanism under it. The national bodies with a mandate to monitor detention conditions, including government supervisory commissions and the Ombudsperson's office are not independent and, judging from the information provided by the authorities, only occasionally carry out visits to detention facilities. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) does not currently have access to monitor the country's detention facilities. During the Human Rights Committee review in March 2023, the government reported having proposed a re-initiation of negotiations with the ICRC on a mutual agreement to provide the basis for such monitoring. At the time of writing, it is not clear what progress there has been on this issue. However, on 10 December 2023, Turkmenistan's foreign minister [held a meeting](#) with the head of the ICRC's regional representation in Central Asia to discuss cooperation in 2024. According to [TIHR's information](#), it is planned that representatives of several state bodies will carry out visits to all the country's prison facilities, which is possibly related to preparations for subsequent visits by ICRC representatives.

The continued practice of enforced disappearances is of serious concern. The authorities have failed to provide comprehensive and transparent information on the cases of disappearances documented by NGOs, including in particular the Prove They Are Alive NGO campaign, which has [documented](#) dozens of cases of enforced disappearances since the systematic use of this practice began after the reported assassination attempt on then President Saparmurat Niyazov in November 2022. The victims include individuals convicted in show trials because of their alleged involvement in the 2022 assassination attempt, former state officials prosecuted after falling out of favour with the government, people charged with so-called Islamic extremism and civil society activists targeted because of their civic engagement. While some of the victims are known to subsequently have died, been released or granted contacts with their family, other cases of disappearances are ongoing. These cases [include](#) those of individuals whose prison sentences are known to have expired but whose status is unknown.

In October 2023, the US-based NGO Crude Accountability published [a new report](#) on Turkmenistan's prison system, which was based on a combination of analysis of satellite imagery, witness accounts, and research. The report concluded that the two prison sites Akdash and Ovadan Depe, which are both believed to accommodate individuals convicted on politically motivated charges and victims of enforced disappearances, are being expanded. According to the report, prison conditions continue to be cruel and inhumane, with reported cases of torture and ill-treatment, inadequate hygiene and nutrition, and denial of medical treatment. These findings are similar to those of a report [published by TIHR and Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association \(TILA\)](#) in 2017, which highlighted serious problems with respect to torture and ill-

treatment, especially of those imprisoned on politically motivated grounds, as well as overcrowding, poor sanitation, scant access to food, widespread diseases such as tuberculosis, and lack of adequate medical assistance in the prison system.

As described above (see the chapter on persecution of civil society representatives), there have recently been several cases in which Turkmenistani activists-bloggers have been forcibly sent back from Turkey to Turkmenistan, despite the serious risk of politically motivated arrest, imprisonment and torture and ill-treatment facing them there. This is another recently reported case in which a Turkmenistani citizen was forcibly returned to Turkmenistan from Russia in violation of the non-refoulement principle:

- According to information obtained by human rights groups, **Ashyrbay Bekiev** was [forcibly sent back](#) to Turkmenistan from Russia in August 2023, despite the well-known pattern of politically motivated imprisonment, torture and ill-treatment and disappearances of those accused of religious extremism in the country. The Turkmenistani authorities had accused Bekiev of promoting “extremism” among Turkmenistani students in Russia – charges which human rights groups believe were trumped-up. After Bekiev was first arrested in Russia in 2016 based on an extradition request from the Turkmenistani authorities, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [issued an interim measure](#) (under its Rule 39 procedure), prohibiting the execution of his extradition given the risk of irreparable harm that this measure would entail. Thanks to the ECtHR ruling, Bekiev was [released](#) but was arrested again in spring 2023 and subsequently returned to Turkmenistan. Human rights defenders learned that Bekiev was [convicted](#) on charges of so-called Islamic extremism upon his return and handed a lengthy prison sentence [following a closed trial](#) to which his family was denied access. His brother, Tachmyrat Bekiev, whom the Turkmenistani authorities similarly have accused of “extremism”, is [believed to remain in detention](#) in Russia.

When reviewing Turkmenistan’s compliance with the ICCPR in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee [raised serious concerns](#) on issues concerning access to justice, treatment of detainees, torture and ill-treatment and enforced disappearances. In particular, the Committee was about the lack of independence of the judiciary and the president’s powers to appoint all judges; the frequent use of closed trials and the absence of a publicly available database of court decisions; the quality of the services of legal counsels and the shortage of lawyers in the country; the failure to provide fundamental legal safeguards to all those deprived of their liberty, including confidential access to a lawyer and contacts with family members; the lack of effective, independent and impartial oversight and monitoring of places of detention; the lack of effective investigations of cases of torture and ill-treatment and the high level of impunity in such cases; and the ongoing practice of secret detention and enforced disappearances and the failure to investigate such cases. Based on its findings, the Committee issued important recommendations to the Turkmenistani authorities.

When Turkmenistan was reviewed in the framework of the UPR in November 2023, it also received numerous recommendations in these areas, including, among others, recommendations to ratify the OPCAT; to grant full access to independent international mechanisms to all places of detention; to investigate and punish all reported cases of torture and enforced disappearances; and to provide information about all disappeared persons.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani government should:

- Implement in good faith relevant recommendations received in connection with the recent Human Rights Committee review and the UPR.
- Take concrete measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and ensure that the judicial system is not used to hand down politically motivated sentences in trials violating international due process and fair trial standards.
- Ensure that the Criminal Code provision on torture is applied in practice and that any allegations of torture and ill-treatment are promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated, the perpetrators prosecuted and given penalties commensurate to their crimes, and the victims granted adequate compensation.
- Put an end to the practice of enforced disappearances and undertake to investigate all cases involving alleged victims of this practice documented by independent NGOs and to provide information about the fate and whereabouts of those concerned in a transparent and systematic manner and to grant those currently held incommunicado access to their lawyers and family members.
- Ratify the OPCAT and establish an effective national system for independent and regular monitoring of all places of detention; and grant the ICRC unhindered access to detention facilities and enable it to carry out monitoring in accordance with its standard procedures.

VIOLATIONS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Although Turkmenistan's government has identified efforts to improve the status of women and promote gender equality as a political priority, women remain one of the most vulnerable groups of the population and women's rights are seriously violated.

As documented in more detail in a recent joint IPHR-TIHR [submission](#) to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the authorities have not only failed to effectively counteract negative gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices but have also contributed to further strengthening such attitudes and practices, in particular by enforcing unofficial restrictions on women's rights in the name of safeguarding national traditions and values. Hopes for improvements following the transfer of presidential powers to from father (Gurbanguly) to son (Serdar) Berdymukhamedov in March 2022 were quickly dashed as a new, reinforced campaign was launched to restrict, control and police women's appearance and conduct.

According to information received by TIHR and other independent sources, [propaganda events](#) were organised in state institutions, public organisations and educational establishments to "educate" women and girls on issues of morality and observance of national traditions and how they are expected to behave, dress and look. Those attending events were threatened with repercussions, including dismissal or expulsion if they fail to comply with requirements such as wearing national-style dresses and refraining from using heavy make-up. There were also reports of police raids on cosmetic shops and beauty salons and arbitrary [checks and detentions](#) of women accused of using beauty services. While the campaign to control women's appearance peaked in spring 2022, there have been new reports about

restrictive measures taken to this end since then. For example, in August 2023, Radio *Azatlyk* [reported](#) that a special task force had been created in the city of Turkmenabashi for the purpose of supervising women's "moral" behaviour in cooperation with the police and other state bodies and that several women had been detained because their appearance was not sufficiently "modest".

Women also continue to face serious obstacles to [obtaining driver's licenses](#) and there have been reports about restrictions on women's travel both [inside the country](#) and [abroad](#).

The authorities' drive to promote so-called traditional and moral values has reinforced entrenched negative and discriminatory attitudes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and girls, in addition to resulting in arbitrary restrictions on their rights. It might also aggravate problems of violence against women by leaving perpetrators feeling vindicated and reinforcing patterns of victim blaming, thereby making victims even more reluctant to report abuse.

A recent first-ever [national survey](#) of gender-based domestic violence, which the government carried out with assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and made public in August 2022, found that 16 percent of all women have experienced violence, including physical, psychological and sexual violence by their husbands/partners. Moreover, 41 percent of the survey respondents reported encountering some form of controlling behaviour from their husbands/partners, such as restrictions on leaving the house, or on working or studying outside the home. Such restrictions further increase the vulnerability of women to physical abuse. The survey also found that women victims of domestic violence rarely reach out for help, with less than 12 percent turning to the police or other institutions. The results indicated that social pressure and the fear of "dishonouring the family" are key reasons why women typically remain silent about violence and refrain from seeking help. In particular sexual violence, which survey respondents reported experiencing least frequently, is associated with a high level of social taboo in Turkmenistan.

Based on the survey results, a number recommendations for how to counter domestic violence against women were formulated, including recommendations to adopt specific legislation on domestic violence, to improve support and protection services for victims of violence, and to expand public awareness raising and education to prevent gender discrimination and violence. According to [information from the government](#), a road map for the implementation of recommendations resulting from the survey has been elaborated for the period 2022-2025. However, it is not clear what concrete actions this roadmap covers or what progress there has been on its implementation to date.

The problem of domestic violence is further compounded by women's limited ability to make choices about their own bodies. According to data from the UNFPA, nearly 60 percent of women in Turkmenistan [do not feel empowered](#) to make autonomous decisions on issues relating to healthcare, contraception, and giving consent to sex. As highlighted by the Progres Foundation, a US-based Turkmenistani group, many women and girls do not have adequate information on issues of sexuality, contraception and abuse. According to a [report](#) from the organisation, materials used in the school curriculum relating to these issues is not scientifically accurate and promotes outdated and harmful gender norms. This demonstrates the importance of developing accurate education material in this area and promoting access to comprehensive information.

When reviewing Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee [voiced concerns](#) about the persistence of patriarchal stereotypes concerning the role of women and men in the family and in society, gender-based discrimination of women and "the high number of reported cases of domestic violence" combined with the lack of state-supported shelters for victims of domestic violence in all regions of the country. It was also concerned about the absence of information on concrete measures taken by the authorities in follow-up to the survey of gender-based domestic violence carried out with UNFPA support. The Committee called on the Turkmenistani authorities to take effective measures to prevent and investigate cases of domestic violence and to prosecute and adequately punish the perpetrators; to expand and strengthen support services and protection for victims of domestic violence through the provision of shelters, psycho-social counselling, and other support services in line with global best practices; and increase awareness among women and girls about the legal remedies available to ensure the protection of their rights.

When Turkmenistan's human rights record was [assessed](#) during the Universal Periodic Review in November 2023, women's rights was also a key topic addressed and important recommendations were issued on this topic. These included, among others, recommendations to expedite the adoption of a comprehensive law specifically defining and criminalising all forms of gender-based violence against women, in particular domestic violence; to provide comprehensive support services to victims and survivors of gender-based violence; to conduct public awareness-raising campaigns and train law enforcement and judicial employees on these issues. Other recommendations concerned removing restrictions on women's appearance, personal freedoms, and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as barriers to their movement.

At its session in Geneva in January-February 2023, CEDAW will review Turkmenistan's compliance with the corresponding convention and issue its conclusions and recommendations concerning women's rights in the country.

It is imperative that the Turkmenistani government takes constructive and effective measures to implement the recommendations resulting from the UNFPA-supported survey, the Human Rights Committee review, the UPR as well as the upcoming CEDAW review.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Put an end to arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on women's and girl's rights and ensure that any efforts to promote so-called traditional values are consistent with national commitments and international human rights standards on women's rights and gender equality.
- Take concrete measures to implement the recommendations resulting from the UNFPA-supported national survey on the health and status of women in the family, the Human Rights Committee review, the UPR and the upcoming CEDAW review. This should, as a priority, include measures to adopt comprehensive legislation criminalising all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence; to systematically investigate and prosecute reported cases of

gender-based violence; to expand and improve support services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence, including through the provision of shelters; and to strengthen public awareness and education in this area. The authorities should also promote access to adequate information on issues of sexuality, reproductive health and abuse, and remove restrictions on women's appearance, fundamental freedoms, and sexual and reproductive rights, which are in violation of the country's international human rights obligations.