

The State of the World's Human Rights; Turkmenistan 2024

The rights to freedom of expression and association remained severely curtailed as the authorities sought to control the flow of information, suffocate civil society and punish all forms of peaceful dissent at home and abroad. Women, girls and LGBTI people faced arbitrary restrictions to their rights, freedoms and bodily autonomy. Reports continued of state-imposed forced labour in the cotton harvest. There was no meaningful action to combat climate change.

Background

The country remained de facto closed to international human rights NGOs, UN special mechanisms and independent media which, together with internal censorship, greatly constrained international oversight and information gathering.

Freedom of expression

The state controlled the flow of information, censoring reports of negative developments such as economic hardship and strictly limiting access to the internet. Hundreds of thousands of domains, including news, business and social media sites, were blocked. Internet speed remained one of the slowest and most expensive in the world, and penetration was low by international standards, disadvantaging rural communities, in particular women.

Security services surveilled and regularly blocked the use of banned virtual private networks, and intimidated, fined or detained users who tried to circumvent state controls.

Repression of dissent

Local civil society organizations and activists were unable to operate freely and independently. Those seeking to peacefully dissent or publicly express critical views, at home and abroad, faced reprisals including imprisonment. Human rights defender Mansur Mingelov and blogger Murat Dushemov continued to serve their sentences in prison colonies in the eastern Lebap region. The authorities still failed to investigate their allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention. They had been convicted of politically motivated charges and sentenced to 22 and four years in prison respectively for exposing human rights violations.

On 6 October exiled activist Dursoltan Taganova was detained at her home in Türkiye by police who claimed that she had been identified as a threat to national security and that she would be deported to Turkmenistan. She was released after several hours, but remained at risk of forcible return.

The authorities continued to prevent civil society activists, independent journalists and their families from travelling abroad.

Security services detained independent lawyer Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev at the border with Iran, where he was intending to travel for medical treatment necessary after two years' imprisonment on politically motivated charges from 2020 to 2022. They informed him of a travel ban barring him from going abroad, including for medical treatment, but refused to show any documentary evidence.

Enforced disappearances

Opposition activist Gulgeldy Annaniyazov was released after 16 years in detention, 11 of which were spent incommunicado. He had been detained in 2008 when he returned from Norway, where he had been granted asylum. However, no further information came to light on the fate and whereabouts of more than 100 individuals forcibly disappeared after their arrest. Some were imprisoned after an alleged assassination attempt on then president Saparmurat Niyazov in November 2002.

Violence against women and girls

In February the CEDAW Committee noted the result of a national survey in 2022 which had found that one in eight women were subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. The committee urged the authorities to adopt, “without further delay, legislation specifically defining and criminalizing all forms of gender-based violence against women, including domestic violence”. The authorities, however, failed to make any significant progress in this regard.

Amendments to the Family Code published in March required courts to prioritize reconciliation of spouses in cases of divorce, even if domestic violence was involved.

Sexual and reproductive rights

The CEDAW Committee also expressed concern about the criminalization of abortions obtained after a gestational limit of five weeks – a point at which most people would not even know they were pregnant. The committee urged authorities to amend legislation to “legalize abortion and decriminalize it in all cases” in line with the 2022 WHO Abortion Care Guidelines.

In October the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that all adolescents should receive “confidential and child-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services, including access to contraceptives and safe abortion where appropriate.”

LGBTI people’s rights

Consensual sexual relations between men remained criminalized. LGBTI persons continued to face pervasive discrimination, violence and abuse, with impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. The authorities refused to expressly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and insisted to the CEDAW Committee that all persons were “equally protected under law against violence, blackmail and similar acts, regardless of their sexual orientation, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons.”

The release abroad of a documentary film on human rights violations against LGBTI persons in Turkmenistan, on 3 July, was followed by reported police raids targeting suspected LGBTI people and those in contact with LGBTI activists abroad.

Forced labour

Forced labour in the cotton harvest continued to be reported, despite the government being more open to cooperation with the ILO in recent years, including allowing it regular visits. An ILO report published in July expressed deep concern about evidence of the continued use of forced labour, including child labour, found during an ILO visit in 2023.

Right to a healthy environment

Despite having signed the Global Methane Pledge at COP28 in December 2023 and agreeing to cooperate with the US government on methane mitigation, the government provided no compelling evidence that it had implemented effective measures to improve leak detection and accelerate remedial action. According to the International Energy Agency's Global Methane Tracker 2024, Turkmengaz, one of the largest oil and gas companies in the world, failed to make any public commitments to reduce methane emissions.