



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings

Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

It has been almost two years since former President Niyazov died in December 2006 and the regime changed in February 2007. After years of dictatorship under President Niyazov, there were high hopes for reform both inside and outside Turkmenistan. On December 14, for the first time since the regime change, Turkmenistan will hold parliamentary elections under the framework of a new constitution and new electoral legislation. Today, we will examine whether this election might mark a turning point for Turkmenistan, as well as whether Turkmenistan is making progress on democratic reform.

I believe there have been some positive steps. Some reform of the education system has taken place. Education is critical to the future of any country – including my own. However, I also have been disturbed recently about reports that Turkmen officials are pressuring young people not to apply for study programs in the United States, and I look forward to hearing what our panelists have to say on the issue.

I also welcome the government's decision to work to integrate its international human rights obligations into Turkmen legislation, judicial practice, and state institutions, including through the establishment last year of a Human Rights Commission under the President.

I urge the Government of Turkmenistan to continue this positive momentum on reform by fully implementing steps it already has begun. This includes revising and reforming the Criminal Code, the Civil Code, and the religion law in cooperation with international experts, registering non-governmental organizations, increasing public access to information via television, internet, and print sources, and continuing dialogue with international entities such as the OSCE, ICRC, and EU.

I also would ask for what would be a clear signal of the government's intention to move forward with reform – allowing access to prisons, including to those imprisoned in connection with the events of November 2002. For the past six years, I have asked for information on and access to our former OSCE colleague, Batyr Berdiev. (BAH-TEER BARE-DEE-YEV)

We have heard reports that he may have died in prison; his family has the right to know whether he is dead or alive. We see no reason why the current Government cannot provide immediately either access to former Minister Berdiev or, if he is no longer alive, information concerning his fate.

Before giving the floor to any of my colleagues who may have a statement, I would like to introduce our excellent lineup of speakers today. And I would like to note that we did invite the Embassy of Turkmenistan to participate today, but unfortunately a scheduling conflict prevented the Ambassador from being here.

For our first panel, we have Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Ambassador George Krol. I would like to note that Ambassador Krol is one of the few U.S. diplomats who actually speak Turkmen.

For our second panel, we have Mr. Anthony Bowyer from IFES (The International Foundation for Electoral Systems), who is the Program Manager for the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia; Dr. Eric McGlinchey, an Assistant Professor of Government and International Affairs at George Mason University and whose expertise includes Central Asia as well as political Islam; and Cathy Fitzpatrick from the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, who has followed developments in Turkmenistan for many years.