



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin

Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I also look forward to hearing this assessment of how the reform process is – or is not – proceeding in Turkmenistan. I agree that there have been some steps forward since the change in regime two years ago. I understand, for example, that the new election law does incorporate some of the suggestions for reform put forward by international organizations, including the OSCE. I look forward to hearing our experts' analysis of that new law and whether it will have an impact on the upcoming elections.

Nevertheless, I am concerned by some recent developments. The June 24, 2008 arrest of former political prisoner Gulgeldy Annaniyazov (GOOL-GEL-DEE ANNA-NEE-AH-ZOF) upon his return from exile abroad sends a chilling message that voices critical of former President Niyazov's policies will continue to be punished by the current Government. I urge the Government of Turkmenistan to take another look at his case. Charges made against him under the previous regime should not be taken at face value. My understanding is that Mr. Annaniyazov was a leader of the so-called "Ashgabad Eight", a group that was arrested in 1995 in connection with a peaceful demonstration calling for expanded democratic reform in Turkmenistan. We urge Turkmen authorities ensure that peaceful human rights advocates are allowed to express themselves freely, in accordance with Turkmenistan's OSCE commitments.

The ability of civil society to freely work and express its views is critical to democratic reform. It is also vital to holding free and fair elections. The ability of candidates to freely express their views and policies – even when critical of incumbents – is also necessary. I hope that the Government of Turkmenistan will ensure that candidates for the December 14 election are able to campaign openly, and that the media is allowed to report freely.