



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The series of hearings on Central Asia launched by the Commission is a very important contribution to our understanding of the trends in those regions. These hearings are also intended to influence the ongoing policy debate in Washington about what to do now that the hopes for rapid democratization, so prevalent in the early 1990s, have proved illusory.

When the Government of Turkmenistan was admitted to the OSCE in 1992, it accepted all existing Helsinki commitments and declared its determination to act in accordance with these provisions. Today, Turkmenistan is reported to be the most repressive of the former Soviet republics. In fact, it sounds like a version of North Korea. But perhaps most disturbing was the decision by the Turkmenistan president to effectively make himself president for life last December. Nothing like this has happened before in the OSCE region and it represents a fundamental challenge to everything the organization stands for.

The effects of the repression in Turkmenistan has reached as far as my home state of Colorado. I have been contacted by a constituent who informed my office about the case of Mr. Nurberdy Nurmamedov, leader of an unregistered opposition movement, who was arrested on January 5th of this year. In December, while a Helsinki Commission staff delegation was in Turkmenistan, the gentleman was brave enough to attend a reception at the home of Ambassador Mann, despite warnings by Turkmen authorities to avoid foreign diplomats. Subsequently, he dared to tell Radio Liberty that the amendment to the country's constitution allowing an individual to serve more than two consecutive presidential terms is "undemocratic and unconstitutional."

For his efforts to speak the truth, a Turkmen district court on February 25 sentenced him to five years in prison for "hooliganism" and "intent to commit murder." His son was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of hooliganism. Turkmen authorities kept foreign diplomats from attending the court proceedings.

I trust that Mr. Byerly of the State Department will have something to say about political prisoners in Turkmenistan. I urge the him to insist on the right to see this gentleman, who I am told is in poor health, and I would appreciate receiving a report on the status of negotiations

between the State Department and the Government of Turkmenistan which I can pass along to those interested constituents in Colorado