



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this hearing on democratization, human rights and religious liberty in Turkmenistan. This is one in a series the Helsinki Commission had held on Central Asia: last May, we examined the political and human rights situation in Kazakstan and in October we turned our attention to Uzbekistan. By the way, considering the awful parliamentary election that has just taken place in Kyrgyzstan, our next Central Asia hearing will probably examine the situation in that country.

Our focus today is Turkmenistan. Under the leadership - or should I say misrule - of Saparmurat Niyazov, the country has become the worst-case scenario of post-Soviet development. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki does not shrink from calling Turkmenistan one of the most repressive countries in the world. Alone of the post-Soviet bloc countries, Turkmenistan remains a one-party state. But even that party is a mere shadow of the former falling Communist Party - all the real power resides in the country's dictator, who savagely crushes any opposition or criticism.

Not only are all political and civil rights ignored or abused in Turkmenistan, freedom of religion is violated. The law - the most restrictive in the former USSR - requires 500 people to register a religious community. Only Islam and Russia Orthodoxy are registered and the authorities have intimidated, arrested, and otherwise persecuted individuals and groups trying to practice their faith. Last November, Turkmen authorities demolished a Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Ashgabat, having previously torn down a Hare Krishna Temple. Except during Bosnian hostilities, I cannot recall another instance of an OSCE participating state destroying a house of worship since Romania in the 1980's.

In fact, much about Turkmenistan today recalls Nicolae Causescu. Niyazov's cult of personality has taken increasingly extreme forms. On December 28, delegates to the People's Council, ostensibly the most authoritative representative body in the country but actually a rubber stamp for Niyzov, gave him the right to remain in office permanently. His virtual coronation as "president for life" fragrantly flouts OSCE commitments, which call for regular and competitive elections.

This move, which many had been expecting, not only offends our sensibilities; it is a serious challenge to the OSCE. If there is no appropriate response, other Central Asian leaders might

be tempted to follow Niyazov's example and the region, which might be described as a "black hole" of human rights, will sink even deeper into the mire.

Last December, a Helsinki Commission staff delegation visited Turkmenistan and spoke at length with Ambassador Mann and Embassy personnel about conditions in the country. Moreover, to judge by the State Department's annual reports on human rights observance, the Clinton Administration has no illusions about Niyazov or his regime. But Washington wants Niyazov's cooperation in building a Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to Turkey under the Caspian Sea, as opposed to transporting gas through Russia or - even worst - Iran. The Administration has invested considerable time, effort, and prestige in this initiative. So US policy toward Turkmenistan offers an excellent case-study of US economic and strategic interests in conflict with human rights concerns.

To discuss all these complicated issues, we have assembled an expert group of witnesses. Testifying for the State Department is John Byerly, the Deputy Coordinator to the Ambassador-at-Large on the New Independent States. Mr. Byerly is a career Foreign Service Officer, who has served in Moscow, Prague and Sofia. From 1993 to 1995, he was the Director for Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council, and he also has experience on the Hill, having been a Foreign Policy Adviser to Senator Paul Simon. Mr. Byerly testified before the Commission last October on Uzbekistan, and we are glad to welcome him back again.

As we did in our hearings on Kasakstan and Uzbekistan, we invited Ambassador Ugur to participate. Moreover, the Commission asked the US Embassy in Ashgabat to inform President Niyazov and Foreign Minister Shikmuradov about these hearings. Nevertheless, we have no representatives from the Government of Turkmenistan to testify.

Some of our other invited witnesses come from great distances. Mr. Avdy Kuliev, for example, came from Moscow. He was Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister in the early 1990's before falling Saparmurat Niyazov. Since 1992, he has lived in Moscow, where he has engaged in opposition political activity, including the establishment of the Turkmenistan Foundation. In April 1998, he returned to Turkmenistan, where the authorities immediately arrested him. Since President Niyazov was in Washington at the time, however, for a meeting with President Clinton, Mr. Kuliev was simply put on a plane back to Moscow.

The second of our guests to come from afar is Pyotr Iwaszkiewicz. A career professional in Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he finished up his assignment as the Human Rights Officer in the OSCE's Center in Ashgabat just last week. Mr. Iwaszkiewicz will offer us not only the most first-hand but the freshest information on what it is like trying to do human rights work in Turkmenistan, and we are pleased he is able to join us today.

Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh began teaching at Yale University in 1956, and was named Professor of History in 1968. He served as director of graduate studies in history, Chairman of the Council on Russian and East European Studies, and Master of Davenport College. He retired from Yale as Professor Emeritus in 1992. In 1998, he was appointed by President Clinton to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Dr. Kazemzadeh has lectured as

visiting professor at Stanford University, Harvard University, Columbia University, Lewis and Clark College and the University of Southern California Law School. He has also lectured at the University of Humanities and the Friendship University in Moscow. Dr. Kazemzadeh is the author of *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* and *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914: A Study in Imperialism*, as well as chapters in collective works such as the *Cambridge History of Iran*, and of numerous articles in various journals.

Cassandra Cavanaugh is a Research Associate at Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, Europe and Central Asia Division. She is also a Ph.D. candidate in History at Columbia University, where she has concentrated on the study of Russian and Central Asian relations. Previously, Ms. Cavanaugh served as Program Officer in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). Upon joining Human Rights Watch in 1998, she conducted human rights fact-finding missions in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Cassandra testified before the Commission last October on Uzbekistan and it is a testament to her expertise that we have invited her back again so soon.

Last, but certainly not least, I am especially pleased to welcome E. Wayne Merry, the Director of the Atlantic Council's Program on European Societies in Transition. Wayne spent 26 years in the State Department, serving - among other postings - six years in Moscow as a specialist in Soviet and Russian politics. He then joined the staff of Secretary of Defense Perry as Regional Director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia to supervise the development of defense and military relations between the Pentagon and the former Soviet Republics. Before coming to the Atlantic Council, Wayne was Senior Advisor to the Helsinki Commission, so we know him quite well. Since his liberation from government service, Wayne has written articles for the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and other leading newspapers, he has become a frequent commentator on TV news shows, and he has testified as an expert witness before Congress. Obviously, there is life after retirement as a public servant.

We look forward to his testimony and that of all our other witnesses. At this point, I would like to ask Co-Chairman Campbell to make his opening remarks.