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Democratization and Human Rights in Turkmenistan

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Mr. Chairman, it's an honor to appear before this Commission and represent the Administration in discussing U.S. interests and recent developments in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan gained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union some eight years ago. Bordering Iran and Afghanistan to the south and sharing the Caspian Sea with Russia, Turkmenistan straddles an important historical trade route between Southwest Asia and the North Caucasus -- a route that today is too often used for illicit transit of people, drugs and weapons. Turkmenistan also shares in the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Basin, which some estimate might rival those of the North Sea. Because of its geo-strategic position, the United States has a stake in seeing Turkmenistan accelerate its development into a democratic state with market-based economy. To promote these interests, we have established a number of priority policy goals:

Strengthening Turkmenistan's commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We have urged the Government of Turkmenistan to hold free, fair and transparent elections and to establish basic protections for human rights; and we have encouraged them to show a greater respect for the rights of all faiths to practice their religions and openly express their beliefs.

Broadening our cooperation with Turkmenistan to counter global threats, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drug and arms trafficking, and terrorism -- interests that assume even greater importance in light of trends in neighboring states to the south.

Supporting Turkmenistan's transition to a market-based economy open to foreign investment. We have tried to advise and assist the Government of Turkmenistan in developing its gas reserves and creating multiple options for delivering them to world energy markets. We have also encouraged Turkmenistan to reduce its dependence on foreign borrowing and commodity export earnings, and stressed the need for enterprise privatization, individual commercial activity, and private property ownership.

Facilitating regional efforts at resource allocation (including water sharing), environmental remediation, and trade and energy development.

The bilateral assistance program funded by Congress serves as a potentially effective tool in pursuing these goals:

In support of market transition, we have provided advice and training on privatization, trade and investment, budget reform and agricultural policy reform.

Security assistance programs aim at enabling Turkmenistan to deter, detect, and prevent trafficking in weapons of mass destruction.

Our limited military assistance programs aim to encourage Turkmenistan to participate more fully in the NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership and other regional security initiatives.

Democracy programs, largely at the community level, focus on such priorities as civic education, NGO training, and legal reform.

Programs in the social sector have been directed towards grass-roots efforts to improve health care delivery and basic education.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, we have had only minimal success in promoting this agenda. In particular, the Government of Turkmenistan has shown scant interest in engaging constructively on core issues of democracy, human rights and economic reform. I would like to address each of these areas in greater detail.

Democracy. Turkmenistan has taken several steps backwards in the past year. Parliamentary elections held December 12 were judged so undemocratic that the OSCE did not even send observers. All of the candidates were hand-picked by the government, and the state-controlled media allowed no free discussion of the issues. Compounding the seriously flawed legislative elections, President Saparmurat Niyazov concocted a vote in Parliament on December 28 that extended his term of office indefinitely. The personality cult centered on

President Niyazov has grown to enormous proportions, and no one dares challenge it.

There is no freedom of association. All community groups must be registered. While a number of domestic NGOs do exist, they have limited, politically non-threatening agendas like nature conservation or women's rights. The government forbids the formation of any organization with even the slightest suggestion of a political agenda. The Democratic (former communist) Party of Turkmenistan is the only officially registered political party. Although freedom of assembly is theoretically guaranteed by the Turkmen constitution, in practice the security services and police break up any meeting suspected of having a political character. Those who attempt to form political parties, express opposition to government policies, or criticize the government are harassed and/or arrested.

Free and open media are vital to the growth of true democracy, but here again Turkmenistan's record is weak. Soviet-style press censorship remains the norm: all media outlets are government-owned and controlled; no independent newspapers or broadcasters are registered; and upstart unofficial or underground media activities are quickly suppressed.

Human Rights. The rule of law is little respected by the Government of Turkmenistan. Human rights groups have documented numerous official actions to silence those who try to exercise the right to free speech and political expression to which Turkmenistan has pledged itself in international agreements. Police and security officials regularly manufacture evidence to justify politically motivated arrests, and on occasion do not even bother with formal charges. Arrestees can expect extended pre-trial detention without the right to visits from their lawyers, or even their closest family. Once on trial, they receive only cursory consideration of their cases by a judiciary wholly answerable to the government (and more directly to President Niyazov himself).

The U.S. government has strongly criticized such cases on numerous occasions -- privately, in public statements, and in international fora such as the OSCE. Our annual Human Rights Report this year assessed the human rights picture as extremely poor, and gave details of many individual human rights violations. Under your leadership, Mr. Chairman, this Commission has consistently echoed and amplified this message, increasing its resonance. Although our efforts have sometimes elicited short periods of milder repression, Turkmenistan has consistently ignored U.S. and international calls to respect its formal commitments to OSCE principles and basic standards of human rights.

Religious freedom is severely restricted by the Government of Turkmenistan. Minority faiths are routinely persecuted. Under Turkmen law religious organizations must register with the government, but the rules are so restrictive that only the Russian Orthodox Church and the Sunni Muslim faith (the two official religions of Turkmenistan) have succeeded in registering. Against the rest, Turkmen authorities pursue a systematic policy of harassment, arrest and deportation of practitioners and clerics, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i and Hare Krishna.

Economic reform is crucial to Turkmenistan's transition, but the Niyazov regime has maintained the heart of a

Soviet-style command economy. Industrial activities are under state control and internal commodity prices are artificially depressed. The government has bet its financial future on anticipated revenues from an as yet unrealized Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline to Turkey, hoping to survive the interim on export earnings from the cotton crop and gas sales to Russia. The government budget virtually ignores the operations of state funds in key sectors, including oil and gas, agriculture, health, transportation, and communications. These funds maintain their own, relatively non-transparent accounts. In addition, a major portion of the government's financial reserves are kept in the Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund, a special account kept under President Niyazov's personal control.

Foreign investors find few real opportunities in Turkmenistan. Every deal must be thoroughly vetted by the central government, which is usually the joint venture partner. Investors involved in disputes with the government find it difficult to have their concerns addressed in any way.

Mr. Chairman, I have painted a bleak picture to underscore our profound concern over Turkmenistan's continued shortcomings, especially in the democratic and humanitarian spheres where the international obligations that President Niyazov voluntarily assumed are so clear. I have done my best to highlight U.S. efforts to point the leadership to a different path, and our work to instill greater appreciation for these basic values among the Turkmen people. We should not be daunted by the current government's intransigence, as the Turkmen people as a whole continue to welcome and appreciate our engagement. There is a talented, energetic younger generation in Turkmenistan, and we believe they can see their current leadership is swimming against the tide of history. This is what gives us the most hope for reform. I should mention in this regard the exemplary efforts of our Embassy in Ashgabat, led by Ambassador Steve Mann, to represent our interests in Turkmenistan. In trying conditions, Ambassador Mann has maintained a constructive dialogue with Turkmen officials, speaking bluntly about the serious shortcomings I have described while reaching out to offer the people of Turkmenistan a broader vision of the future.

Mr. Chairman, Central Asia is an area of increasing concern for important American interests, and Turkmenistan's geo-strategic position dictates our continued engagement. We remain convinced that progress toward democracy and a market-based economy is critical to Turkmenistan's ability to establish itself as an independent, stable and prosperous member of the community of nations. With the support of this Commission and the Congress as a whole, we will keep working toward this goal.