



## HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

### Testimony :: Hon. Joseph Pitts

Commissioner - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this timely hearing examining the human rights record of Turkmenistan. As you know, I have a keen interest in the region, having traveled there last year. I agree with you that Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive states in the OSCE region, particularly regarding human rights issues. By every measure, Turkmenistan is violating its OSCE commitments.

Let me mention some notable statistics in relation to Turkmenistan. In bulldozing the Hari Krishna temple last August and the Seventh Day Adventist church last November in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan became the only OSCE country to actually destroy places of worship. By only permitting two religious groups to function, and both of them as quasi-governmental entities, and by requiring, similar to other oppressive countries in the region, that any other group have 500 members before they can register, Turkmenistan maintains a repressive hold on religious practice unparalleled in the OSCE region. Turkmenistan is the only former Soviet republic with no legal Bible society or Bible bookstore and in spite of having 800 signatures for the a registration application, legal status was refused last October. Turkmenistan's cavalier attitude toward human rights was further underscored last year when police arrested democracy activist and former parliamentarian Mr. Piringuli Tanrykuliev while he was lunching with the U.S. Embassy's human rights officer, and in August sentenced him to eight years imprisonment on trumped-up charges. Last December, two Baptist pastors were arrested and deported while Helsinki Commission staff were meeting with government officials in Ashgabat on human rights and religious liberty issues.

I have been personally involved, through the Religious Prisoners Congressional Task Force, in the case of Shageldy Atakov, an ethnic Turkmen Baptist lay preacher, who is imprisoned on trumped up charges because of his religious activity. Mr. Atakov is also considered as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and Jubilee Campaign. Credible reports indicate that he is being tortured in prison. The Jehovah's Witnesses have also reported the continuing arrest and torture of their members. Two weeks ago, pastor Shokhrat Piriev of the Turkmen Church Union was arrested, his car and identity papers confiscated, and internally deported from Ashgabat for his religious activities. Recently, his car and papers were returned, but his church continues to be harassed by security forces. Authorities continue to show signs that they will force Mr. Piriev to move. I find this litany of human rights abuses very disturbing.

Unfortunately, it is not only with Turkmenistan that I am troubled. I have seen a tendency in

the engagement of our own government with Turkmenistan to over-emphasize stability and strategic economic interests and de-emphasize human rights. Anytime a U. S. Government official sits down with a Turkmen government official, human rights concerns must be at or near the top of the talking points. We cannot separate our discussion on other issues from the ongoing violations of human rights. I would like to see this message much more strongly conveyed by all levels and all branches of the U.S. Government.

Mr. Chairman, my hope is that this hearing, along with the important work of the human rights community, will help to fan the flames of democracy and will promote the upholding of the fundamental human freedoms of the people of Turkmenistan. I look forward to hearing more from our witnesses on these issues.

Once again, thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this timely and important hearing.