

Good afternoon. My name is Ron McNamara and I am serving as the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Today's briefing is a cooperative effort with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Members of the Helsinki Commission – Members from both the House and Senate – have repeatedly raised concerns regarding the human rights situation in Turkmenistan with Turkmen representatives as well as with senior U.S. officials and OSCE Chairs-in-Office, including Minister Passy from Bulgaria.

At the Helsinki Commission, we assess developments on the ground in Turkmenistan in light of the commitments that country accepted in becoming a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In this regard, it is worth noting the historical fact that President Niyazov personally signed the 1975 Helsinki Final Act on behalf of Turkmenistan on July 8, 1992.

The Members of the Helsinki Commission have taken a strong stance against the ongoing human rights abuses and religious oppression in Turkmenistan. I note that in October of last year, eight members of the Helsinki Commission and 26 other Members of Congress wrote Secretary Powell urging him to designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. Since its writing, the situation for religious freedom has continued to deteriorate, further validating the point of the letter and reinforcing the message of the 34 Members of Congress. Copies listing other Helsinki Commission initiatives on Turkmenistan are available on the documents table.

Despite the determined efforts of the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Tracy Jacobson, Niyazov appears unwilling to make the necessary changes to avoid meeting the statutory criteria for CPC designation. In an attempt to shun designation and a UN Human Rights Commission resolution, Niyazov's government undertook a spring charm offensive and issued new paper promises on religious freedom, reducing the 500-member threshold for registration to five persons. Tellingly, these "improvements" also increased the control of the authorities over funding sources and registration.

The Niyazov regime has demonstrated the cosmetic nature of these legislative changes, as numerous problems for religious freedom continue to persist. For instance:

- New criminal code amendments passed in October 2003 included large fines, imprisonment and the possibility of hard labor for the "crimes" of operating or participating with an unregistered religious community. These articles remain on the books.
- On March 2, a court convicted the former Islamic leader of Turkmenistan of treason and sentenced him to 22 years in jail. Reportedly, the Mufti ran afoul of the authorities when he refused to place Niyazov's spiritual book, the *Rukhnama*, next to the Koran at the front of his mosque.
- No religious community has successfully registered despite the supposed liberalization of the registration process.

At the Helsinki Commission we are particularly mindful of the hardship faced by individuals living authoritarian regimes or dictatorship. In some cases there can be a tendency to develop a kind of caricature of such regimes based on the idiosyncrasies of the leader in question. We must avoid such approaches that often overlook the real repression and abuse. Illustrative cases include the following.

- Despite being released from prison over two years ago, Baptist Pastor Shagildy Atakov remains internally exiled in Turkmenistan.
- Six Jehovah's Witnesses are known to be serving time in prison for conscientiously objecting to military service.

Overall, Turkmenistan is a severe violator of religious freedom and therefore meets CPC criteria because of its "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom." New efforts by Niyazov to avoid designation fall far short of genuine change.

Any meaningful change must end the repression of religious communities and allow fully respect the right of individuals to profess and practice their faith or belief.

I therefore look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel, as they will provide a timely assessment of developments in Turkmenistan as the State Department prepares to make designation determinations in the near future.

As is customary at Commission briefings, there will be a full transcript of the proceedings. In addition, time permitting we will open the floor to questions from the audience following presentations by our panelists. When posing a question, please state your name and any affiliation.

I appreciate CIRF bringing this distinguished panel together to discuss the deteriorating situation for religious liberty under President Niyazov's authoritarian regime. Tomorrow CIRF will release its policy recommendations, and I hope the State Department will heed their solid recommendations on Turkmenistan.

At this time, I recognize Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director for the Commission on International Religious Freedom, to give a few opening remarks and to introduce the panel.