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REPORT

TURKMENISTAN: Dashoguz women's prison colony



NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

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Dashoguz is located in the very North of Turkmenistan.

I Introduction

The report submitted by the government of Turkmenistan to the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) in March 2009 and released for general distribution in August 2010¹, underlines that legislation in Turkmenistan prohibits forms of punishment that aim to cause physical suffering or are a violation of human dignity, and that prison conditions must not be such that they may constitute a threat to the life and health of a person sentenced for a crime.

Principles outlined in Article 1 and elsewhere in the UN Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment are echoed in Articles 3 and 13 in the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan.

However, as shown in this report, prison conditions in Turkmenistan are such that they do not meet the international standards. Also, it is effectively impossible to carry out prison monitoring in the country. While other member states in the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with the exception of Uzbekistan, are generally accessible to international organizations carrying out ordinary monitoring and research, Turkmenistan continues to block access to outside observers by declining to issue visas to representatives of human rights groups. The last humanitarian organization to operate in Turkmenistan, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), decided to close their program in the country in April 2010, citing insurmountable difficulties in co-operating with the Turkmen government.²

Turkmenistan is the country in the former Soviet Union which remains the most inaccessible to international human rights organizations and monitoring groups. Indeed, on the global level, the country ranks at the bottom of all major indexes in the sphere of democracy and human rights.

The Economist Democracy Index ranks Turkmenistan as number 165 of 167 countries, better only than Chad and North Korea.³ Reporters Without Borders places it as number 176 of 178 in their Press Freedom Index⁴, while the Freedom House Index gives it the worst score possible, 7.0.⁵

Inside the country, no serious human rights groups are able to function openly. Some organizations do exist, but these do not openly criticize government policies.

1 http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/AdvanceVersions/CAT-C-TKM-1_ru.pdf
2 <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2010/MSF-Turkmenistan-Opaque-Health-System.pdf>
3 http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf
4 <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>
5 [http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/CombinedAverageRatings\(IndependentCountries\)FIW2010.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/CombinedAverageRatings(IndependentCountries)FIW2010.pdf)

As a reaction to the obstacles created by Turkmen authorities to independent monitoring of the human rights situation inside the country, a large group of prominent organizations issued a statement in September 2009, calling for access to Turkmenistan. Among them were Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, Open Society Institute, Human Rights Center Memorial, Freedom House, Crude Accountability, Norwegian Helsinki Committee and many others.⁶

Taking this into consideration, this report offers a rare glimpse into day-to-day life for the over 2000 women serving their sentences in a prison colony in Dashoguz in the very North of Turkmenistan. Beyond the report published by the Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) in February 2010, *Turkmenistan's Penitentiary Facilities*⁷, no detailed insight into the prisons of Turkmenistan has earlier been made available.

While the TIHR report offers an invaluable overview of the different prisons in the country, including the women's colony in Dashoguz, this report gives further details on life inside this particular colony. Turkmen civil society activists have collected this information through interviews with former inmates in the colony and their relatives.

As the Turkmen activists regrettably cannot present the report themselves due to security concerns, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee submits this report, based on the material collected by the Turkmen activists, for the review of Turkmenistan at the 46th session of the UN Committee against Torture.⁸

6 <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/30/call-access-turkmenistan>

7 <http://www.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1266867677.pdf>

8 <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/cats46.htm>

II Recommendations

To the government of Turkmenistan:

- Allow independent human rights monitoring groups to visit Turkmenistan, and to freely examine the current situation in the country's prisons as well as in the country in general;
- Allow local non-governmental organizations to carry out monitoring work without the threat of sanctions and arrest from the side of the authorities;
- Launch an independent investigation into prison conditions in Turkmenistan and take serious measures to improve living conditions inside the camps, end the system of bribing, beating, and other forms of torture;
- Free political prisoners and reconsider cases where inmates have been sentenced with basis in faulty evidence and unfair trials;
- Initiate comprehensive prison reforms according to international human rights principles in general, and UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners in particular;
- Invite international human rights actors with special expertise on prison reforms to help formulate reform plans and in implementing them.

To the international community:

- Hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable to its human rights obligations, raising the topic in all interaction with the government;
- Press for the government of Turkmenistan to invite UN special procedures to be invited to the country;
- Press for the government of Turkmenistan to allow visits by independent human rights monitoring groups to the country, including missions to examine prison conditions.

To international companies operating in Turkmenistan:

- Press for independent human rights monitoring groups to be allowed access to the country;
- Engage in any case involving imprisonment of local staff;
- Promote respect for human rights in Turkmenistan, pointing *inter alia* to the positive effects of rule of law, respect for human rights and democratic values for economic and social development.

III Structure and numbers

The women's colony in Dashoguz (formerly Tashauz) in the North of Turkmenistan was established in Soviet times, over 40 years ago. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the colony started being used for female prisoners.

According to unconfirmed reports, new buildings were added to the Dashoguz prison colony in the course of 2010. The current size of the colony remains unknown, but at the time when the information for this report was gathered around 2009-2010, there were clear indications that the prison was overpopulated.

The exact number of inmates in the different divisions of the prison remains uncertain, due to the fact that no independent monitoring of the prisons in Turkmenistan is permitted. In some cases, where the numbers collected for this report differ slightly from those presented in the 2010 TIHR report, this will be indicated in footnotes.

The total number of inmates started growing in the late 1990s, and has continued to grow in the time since. In the spring of 1997, the colony held 223 women, in March 1999 it held around 500. In October 2004, the colony had over 2200 inmates, out of which 700 were amnestied and released a month later. However, by 2005 there were 2400 women in the colony.

In the period 2008-2009 the colony held on average 2300-2500 inmates, and the number did not fall below 2000 persons even after many were released under an amnesty. About three fourths of the inmates are sentenced for crimes connected to drugs, and most others for embezzlement and theft.

The colony is divided into a number of different "regimes", indicating the security level in a particular division of the prison. These divisions, common to many prisons in the former Soviet Union, include Common Regime, Strict Regime, Prison Regime and an Isolation Block. Around 2004, new buildings were set up in order to divide women who were sentenced to different "regimes". However, the current number of buildings is not designed to hold more than 1000 inmates,⁹ whereas the actual number greatly exceeds this.

According to information from the fall of 2009, inmates serving in the Common Regime, or Minimum Security, were divided into 6 divisions. In general each division can hold 250-300 inmates, plus another division for handicapped, seriously ill and elderly inmates. The TIHR report estimates the number of inmates in the Common Regime to be 780.

⁹ The TIHR report estimates the total capacity to be 700.

In the beginning of 2010, another two divisions of inmates in the Common Regime were set up. The living-quarters of the first division is considered to be the showcase of the prison colony – the buildings are newly repaired, there are flowers in the window sills and a color television.

There is a 3-story block for inmates living under the Strict Regime, or Maximum Security, holding up to 300 people,¹⁰ and a one-story block for inmates serving under the so-called Special Regime. This last category includes repeated offenders and those sentenced for particularly grave crimes, and holds up to 150 people.¹¹

There is also a lock for inmates serving under Penitentiary Regime, which the TIHR report estimates to 75 people. Yet another 15-20 people are held in a one-story brick barracks for inmates who are ill with tuberculosis, and around 10 people are serving in a so-called Isolation Block for high-ranking inmates held under special control.

Foreigners are held under common conditions, however the number of foreign inmates is unknown.

According to a former inmate, in the period 2006-2009, minors between the ages 14-18 were also being held in a small area near the supervisor's post in the colony. The TIHR report estimates the number of minors in the prison to be 215.

The practice of yearly mass amnesties initiated by former president Saparmurat Niyazov was ended in 2007, meaning that the number of people leaving the prison camp after amnesties in 2008-2009 was significantly smaller than in earlier years.

According to lists published in Turkmen media less than 100 women were released under amnesties in February and September 2009, while about 100 were released in February 2010. This is significantly lower than the 1100 who were released under an amnesty in the fall of 2007. After amnesties, the number of inmates will quickly rise again due to new arrivals.



¹⁰ The TIHR report estimates the number of inmates in the Strict Regime to be 1020.

¹¹ The TIHR report estimates the number of inmates in the Special Regime to be 135.

IV Nutrition and living conditions

According to eyewitnesses, all the living quarters of the colony are currently overpopulated. Because of the lack of sleeping space, inmates do not only sleep on two-story beds but also on the floor between them. Sometimes additional military tents are set up in the colony. During the hot season, part of the inmates sleep outside.

In winter-time, the entire block is heated with radiators, and in the summer the windows are replaced by nets.

Because of the overcrowded living-quarters, some of the inmates were moved to a sewing factory in the beginning of 2010.

According to eyewitnesses, there is no ventilation or heating system, instead of windows there are small, closed polyethylene windows. The space is damp and water drips from the ceiling.

None of the blocks have enough bed sheets, part of the inmates have only a mattress or a blanket.

There is also not enough room in the cafeteria, which is intended for 1000 people. Part of the food is embezzled by the administration. An enormous line for food is formed every time, and fist fights often break out.

The food rations are very meager:

For breakfast – a fourth of a loaf of black bread (the bread is poorly baked, and is “like clay” according to inmates). On rare occasions, inmates receive canned salted tomatoes.

For lunch – *balanda*, which is prison jargon for any low-quality soup. It is cooked on bones and cotton oil with pumpkin instead of potatoes, there is practically no meat. Also served is porridge from black grain and bread.

For dinner – wheat porridge, sometimes canned anchovies and bread is added.

Additional food can be prepared in secret from ingredients that relatives bring or that are bought from the prison guards. However, cooking yourself is in violation of the prison regime. Usually, the administration closes its eyes to this, but during searches, inmates can be punished by being put in an isolation cell if forbidden products or items are found.

During meetings with relatives, up to 25 kilos of food products may be given to the inmate. Officially, it is not allowed to receive potatoes, eggplants, turnips, pumpkin, squash, cotton oil, grains, macaronis, coffee, marinade, food products in glass containers, as well as cutlery, water-boilers, electronics, mobile phones, flammables, matches and hair-color.

Searches are carried out once a week, forbidden items are taken away, including money and items intended for sale (such as knitted socks in more than 3 pairs). If money is confiscated, the inmate must present a written explanation on the source of the money. Once a year, a “general search” is conducted.

Inmates may visit the wash-house once a week (additional visits are possible for an unofficial fee of 5-10,000 Manats.¹²

The inmates wear black coats with a badge that states their name and division number and a white scarf which must completely cover the hair. They should wear black shoes (if the shoes are white they are painted with black color). As a rule, the inmates sow the clothes themselves or acquire them through relatives.

The inmates must also acquire their winter clothes themselves. In the end of 2007, the administration of the colony promised for the first time to give out winter jackets. In January 2008, inmates who were working outdoors were given about 200 jackets (about a fourth of the number actually needed). However, after this, warm clothes were not handed out.

Corruption is endemic in the colony. Practically all employees accept bribes, and every “service” has its own price (food products, medicine, visits, lighter work etc.). For instance, a sick-leave confirmation costs 30,000 Manats per day, an unofficial leave from work is valued several times higher. The use of a room for visits costs 600,000 Manats, for a visit of a whole family the price is up to 100 US Dollars. The price of a plastic bottle of vodka for the New Year’s celebrations has gone up to 200,000 Manats.

On their free time, inmates have access to a library, television, arts & crafts, and once every so often there are concerts. New Year’s celebration is allowed until 2 am. A Christmas tree is placed in the yard, and inmates may dance around it.

Half a year after the death of Niyazov on 21 December 2006, the practice of singing the “national oath” of loyalty to the President was ended, and the same year also the practice of demanding that those freed by an amnesty must give an oath on the

¹² In 2009, both new (denominated) and old Manats were in circulation. In this report, all prices are given in old Manats. In the beginning of 2010, the exchange rate was 1 USD = 2,2843 New Manats = 14,200 Old Manats.

Rukhnama (the Holy Book of the President). The Rukhnama is no longer studied in the colony.

The inmates may perform religious rituals (the colony has a small mosque, which is open to everyone) and if they wish, may read the official press, which is delivered on an irregular basis. There are no radio receivers.

Postal communications are controlled by the administration. In order to avoid control, many inmates send letters via visitors to the colony. However, this is a violation of the rules and unsanctioned postal communication may result in serious punishment, including being placed in a disciplinary cell.

V Medical services

Upon their arrival to the colony, new inmates are kept in quarantine for two weeks. They are checked for lice and blood samples are taken to check for syphilis. Once a year, inmates go through fluorography. Inmates are not checked for other diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Inmates do not go through any additional checks for other diseases or illnesses.

Medical services are performed by 2 doctors and 4 nurses. If needed, a dentist or gynecologist will arrive from the city. The medical center is open from 9 am until 6 pm. It has a station with 10 bunk beds.

Medicine is practically unavailable in the medical station as well as in the tuberculosis barracks. The patients have to buy all medicines, syringes and medical supplies unofficially from the doctors at the colony. Relatives are not allowed to give any medicines or personal hygiene items to the inmates. In rare instances, inmates are allowed to keep insulin and heart medicine.

As mentioned earlier, the colony has a separate block for inmates suffering from tuberculosis, which is intended for 15-20 people. The surrounding territory is closed on all sides by metal fences beyond which the sick are not allowed to go. There is also a separate toilet here and a water tap. Work for the inmates is also organized inside the division (carpet cleaning, spinning, knitting socks).

Sick inmates get an extra 2 dl of milk every day and 200 grams of margarine every ten days (two times less than in 2007).

According to eyewitnesses, only some of those suffering from tuberculosis are kept in the "tuberculosis building". Because of the lack of space, those suffering from both open and closed forms of tuberculosis are kept together. In 2007-2008 the total number of sick persons was about 40. There are unofficial numbers suggesting that this number had increased several times by the spring of 2009.

Emergency surgical operations and births are done at the city hospital in Dashoguz. Those who are sick or pregnant are brought there in a convoy consisting of a doctor and two soldiers.

Information on the situation for pregnant women varies between different sources. The information collected for this report differs from that of the TIHR report, which found that women were left together with the child for 12 months after giving birth. Other sources state that during transport to the hospital or the delivery room, the woman

is kept handcuffed to two soldiers. While giving birth, the woman is handcuffed to the bed from both sides. Immediately after birth, the child is given to the husband or to relatives, and if there are no relatives, the child will remain in the hospital and the woman is brought back by convoy to the prison. After 1-2 days she returns to work.

VI Forced labor

The standard time-table for a day at the colony is:

06:00	Wake up (on Sundays, 08:00)
07:00	Line up
07:30	Breakfast
08:00	Work begins
12:00-14:00	Line up and lunch
17:00	Evening line up
18:00	Dinner
22:00	Retire (On Saturdays, 23:00)

Sundays is a day off.

Officially, all healthy inmates should be busy with work. To receive temporary leave from work, one has to pay a bribe. One may also be designated to lighter work in exchange for money.

The inmates work in the sewing factory (making shoulder-straps and bedding for army soldiers), carpets, embroideries (national embroideries and ketene, which is national hand-made silk fabric used in national costumes), making bricks, tending to vegetable patches and animals, re-using of old carpets to make socks. Those who are suffering from tuberculosis as well as inmates from the "Special Regime" and the "Isolation Regime" blocks are also used for work on carpets, they comb them out directly on the ground near their corpuses.

Work in the "services" (janitors, toilet cleaners, bathroom cleaners, builders, cafeteria workers) is considered lighter work, and to get such work one must pay a bribe. For instance, being designated for work in the cafeteria will cost from 300 to 500 US dollars, being designed to the position of bath house worker costs up to 800 US dollars.

$\frac{3}{4}$ of the starting salary of the inmates (from 300 to 700 Manats per month, in old currency) is taken by the administration for necessities in the colony and the rest is paid out upon release from the colony. However, a large part of the money is taken by the administration, and the inmates are forced to sign documents that indicate larger sums than they actually receive.

Combing and reworking carpets is very hazardous to the health because of the amount of parasites that will enter your lungs during such work. The administration does not give out materials to protect the skin or the airways, and does not take any other measures to protect the health of those carrying out this work.

VII Ill-treatment and torture

Punishment for violations of the rules in the colony will often take the form of placement in a punishment isolator (ShIZO) from 3 to 15 days. Usually, inmates are put in the ShIZO after fights (for instance, in the line at the cafeteria), feigning or attempting suicide, using electric appliances to make food or for keeping money or mobile phones.

The punishment isolator is a separate building surrounded by a fence, with 8 rooms. The size of the rooms is about 1,5 m x 2 m, with a dirt floor. From 6 to 10 people can be placed in such a room. There are no bunk beds or regular beds. There is a small bench on which one can only sit. There is a cut-out window sized 50 x 50 cm. A bucket is used as toilet. The food consists of *balanda* soup once a day.

The barracks are not fully heated. There is no bedding handed out. The inmates placed in the ShIZO are forbidden to put on jackets or coats. In the cold winter times there were instances where inmates in the ShIZO became ill with lung infection. In the summer the temperature rarely drops below +30°C, even at night. In the daytime, the temperature is almost always above +40°C.

In instances of attempted suicide, all the inmates are lined up for 3-4 hours in the heat or the cold - in other words, prison authorities as a rule conduct collective punishment.

According to former inmates, rape and torture was widely practiced in the colony until 2005. In a number of cases, beating of the inmates by the prison guards ended in death. In these instances, the death certificates would indicate cirrhosis of the liver, kidney and heart failure as the reason of death.

During an address at the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan in July 2005, former president Niyazov admitted the existence of these problems, after which the leadership of the colony was changed and two employees were sentenced for rape of underage inmates, and the male personnel of the colony were exchanged for female personnel, apart from the external security, which consists of soldiers from the emergency service. A criminal case was opened regarding the death of one of the inmates,¹³ and the guilty were sentenced.

After this, beatings of the inmates in the women's colony stopped for a period. However, according to our information, the practice of beating started again in 2009.

¹³ TIHR press release 24.07.2005.

In February 2009 one of the inmates who was celebrating her birthday was severely beaten for keeping a mobile telephone and alcoholic drinks, to such an extent that she had to be kept in the hospital barracks for a few days after. After a few days, she was carried to the ShIZO, as she couldn't walk herself due to the beatings. According to inmates, the head of the colony, Mr. H. Geldiev and his deputy participated in the beating (Geldiev was removed from his position in the end of 2009, for having accepted bribes).

VIII “Enemies of the people”

In the last years of Niyazov’s rule, as a result of the use of collective punishment in the women’s colony, the prison started receiving inmates who were relatives of those sentenced as “enemies of the people” or high-ranking civil servants who had become subject of persecution on the order of the president. These inmates were kept under special control, and on the order of Ashgabat the administration tried to completely isolate them from other inmates and from the outside world. This practice continues also under the new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

At the moment, these “special inmates” are kept in a separate, isolated block, which was built over 2-3 days in December 2006, after the decision was made to transfer part of the inmates from the secret prison in Ovadan-Depe near Ashgabat to ordinary colonies. The block consists of a row of single rooms, separated by two rows of nets. Inmates on this block are forbidden to speak to one another, and other inmates are forbidden to walk up to the bars under threat of punishment.

In September 2009, 10-11 women were held in the block. Among them were Engebay Ataeva (the former Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, who was arrested in 2007), Guzel Atayeva (wife of the former Chairman of the Medzhilis (Parliament), who was arrested together with her husband in December 2006), Kurbanbibi Atadzhanova (the former Prosecutor General, arrested in 2006), Atadzhanova’s daughter and former employee, and possibly one or two of those sentenced after the assassination attempt on President Niyazov in November 2002.

In 2007, Maya Geldyeva (the sister of Enebay Ataeva, arrested in 2002 in connection with embezzlement of 40 million US dollars from the Central Bank of Turkmenistan) was transferred to the “isolation block”.

Three of these inmates, including Kurbanbibi Atadzhanova, were transferred to Dashoguz from Ovadan-Depe in December 2006. They all wore hoods on their head while being transferred. According to prison guards, Atadzhanova was not aware that President Niyazov had died, and thought that she was being brought for execution. In the car, the hoods were taken off. The prisoners were very weak and dehydrated and asked the officer on duty for a piece of bread. Upon arrival to Dashoguz the former Prosecutor General moved with difficulty, she had to be supported to her cell. When the convoy arrived, more guards were set up, inmates were not allowed to go out of their barracks. As an irony of fate, Atadzhanova ended up in the same colony that she had called a “holiday resort” when she inspected it during a visit in 2006, three months before she was arrested.

Because of the poor prison conditions, Guzel Atayeva attempted to commit suicide in July 2008,¹⁴ after which the conditions were made easier for her.

14 TIHR press release, 24.07.2005.

IX Meetings with relatives

The criminal and executive legislation of Turkmenistan regulates the frequency and length of inmates' meetings, depending on the regime that was decided upon by the court. At the moment, an addition to the correctional-work code is in effect, which was passed in the Soviet era (the new code is being written). Inmates in the "Common regime" may have 12 short visits and 6 longer visits a year.

The short visits which are set to one hour by prison regulations are in reality limited to half an hour. In March 2009, instead of two one hour meetings a month, the practice became two-hour meetings with intervals of 2 months. The meetings take place in two adjacent rooms of about 2 x 3 m. A glass wall divides the visitor and the inmate. The conversation takes place through two netted hatches installed on the wall (each 50 x 100 cm). Previously, each room for meetings with relatives could not hold more than two people. Because of the great number of visitors up to 8 inmates are now placed in one room, and up to 4 people can speak to them. There are 3 chairs on each side, where people take turns sitting. It is very noisy in the room, and you must completely lean in towards the hatch in order to hear anything, and there is not room enough for everybody to do this.

For longer, one-day meetings with the right to stay together with close relatives (including children, parents, brothers and sisters), rules stipulate that each family should be given a separate room. However, because of the over-crowding, the prison started placing two families in each room from 2005 on. Those who wanted to be separate had to pay a bribe. Those who could not fit in one room were placed in the kitchen or other fitting spaces, such as the corridor near the washing room. Visitors slept directly on the floor here.

From 2008 the normal practice is to place up to 3-4 families in each room.

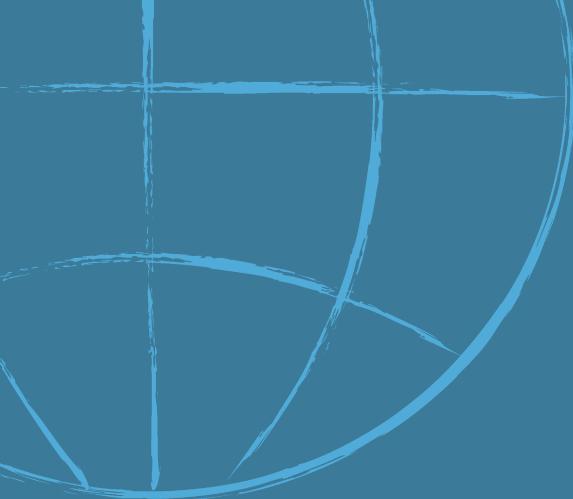
From 9 March 2009, the administration of the colony, in violation of the regulations in the colony, started allowing day-long visits only to the spouses of inmates, and children under the age of 7. Absurd situations arose, where for instance the husband of an inmate was asked to leave the child outside during the visit. Other relatives were offered to speak with inmates for 15-20 minutes through the "hatch". Also, only one visitor is allowed to the meeting, it is forbidden to bring children. This had a serious effect on the morale among many female inmates.

The administration of the colony explains the new rules as being oral instructions from the President, which supposedly are based on recommendations from international experts on standards in penitentiaries in the West.

In the beginning of September 2009, the day-long meetings with relatives were re-introduced. From 30 to 40 day-long meetings took place every day, and all 9 rooms and other spaces were used for these meetings. According to eyewitnesses, the rooms were over-crowded, visitors fought over space, some could not tolerate such conditions and ended the meeting themselves.

Article 19 of the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment, adopted by the UN in 1988, states that “A detained or imprisoned person shall have the right to be visited by and to correspond with, in particular, members of his family and shall be given adequate opportunity to communicate with the outside world, subject to reasonable conditions and restrictions as specified by law or lawful regulations.”

In practice, the situation in the Dashoguz prison appears to be in breach of this principle as well as a range of other international standards.



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