



## Press Conference in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

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**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** Thank you all for coming and I apologize for the delay. I wanted to just start off quickly by giving you a sense of what I am doing here in Turkmenistan. So, I came with the delegation on Thursday. We've had a very full two days of meetings here. We've had a good opportunity to meet with a wide variety of people from civic organizations, different government ministries, folks at the religious affairs council and we've had very good, productive meetings. We've had a wide range of discussions about issues on human dimension, including human rights issues, prisoners of concern, looking at some of the reforms that the government has laid out, that they would like to undertake, talking about how we could cooperate with the government, with civic organizations as they work to undertake the reform program that the president has laid out, and talking about steps that we believe would be useful for the government to take as well as ways that we can work together. So we've had a productive set of meetings. It's been a pleasure. I've been very warmly welcomed here in Turkmenistan and we look forward to continuing our efforts to help in the process of reform that the government has laid out. So with that I guess I would like to hear your questions.

**RFE/RL (in Russian):** Please if you could share with us how your suggestions on reforms in the human rights sphere were accepted by the government. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** Yes. Thank you very much. We discussed with the number of folks in different ministries, including the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs we will speak with later today, and with the Religious Affairs Councils a number of issues on the human rights front. For example, we've discussed efforts that are now underway to reform the criminal justice code. And we discussed ways that we could help and assist in efforts to implement new provisions in that code with training for lawyers, training for prosecutors working with the law schools here to improve professionalism in the legal craft and also to implement these news reforms, make people aware of the new regulations and laws. We've also talked about the role of commercial media and the internet in providing information to the citizens. And the importance of having commercial media be able to report on what is going on here in Turkmenistan, so that folks on the outside know, but also so that the citizens themselves understand the efforts that the government is undertaking. Those are just two examples of again the wide range of issues we discussed. But I think they illustrate the kind of frank dialog we've been able to have.

**RFE/RL (in Russian):** So our headquarters RFE/RL they've written a request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that we could have, first of all, accreditations here in Turkmenistan and then would be freely allowed to attend all the ceremonies and events that are happening and at the same time to have freedom to report on the events happening here in Turkmenistan. But unfortunately until now we don't have any response from them, and moreover we're prosecuted by the ministry of national security for our actions. So is there anything that you could do to help in the situation?

**REUTERS (in Russian):** In addition, ITAR-TASS also doesn't have an accreditation and the journal-magazine "Ogonyok" was also dis..[not audible]

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** The United States is always outspoken around the world about the important role we believe the press plays in ensuring that information is available around the world, it's a global information society. And we have raised this and will continue to raise what we believe is important to have a commercial press with access and be able to give information because it's important for citizens here to have information, but it's also important for the government to be able to inform accurately the outside world about what's going on and what they're trying to do on the reform front.

**RFE/RL (in Russian):** One more question is about the black list of those citizens who are not able to travel abroad and we are part of that black list, we're not able to ...

**Article writer for IWPR and member of Project "Reports Central Asia" (in Russian):** And criminal procedures, trials don't give any results, because the trials are also at the side of national security.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** We continued to raise, have in the past, and we'll continue to raise our concerns about persons who have not been allowed to exit the country. And we will continue to raise this issue because we believe in freedom of movement. It's a fundamental right and we believe that it's important for people to be able to come and go. It's also part of globalization, people move more than they used to in the past. And it's important for international relations, for business relations, for education and we'll continue to raise that because we are concerned when people are not allowed to exit. So yes, we raise these concerns and will continue to do so.

**Article writer for IWPR and member of Project "Reports Central Asia" (in Russian):** So do you believe when you talk about trainings, do you believe that trainings will help to improve the situation with the special law enforcement agencies? Because organizations, for example OSCE since their establishment here in 1999, every year, for at least eight or nine years conducting this type of trainings for law enforcement agencies, customs and police, ministry of national security. And this doesn't give any results. So I think that what should be first done is to do something in the field of corruption. Because corruption is the major issue in all of these --- and the government should do something in order to eradicate corruption here. So training by itself doesn't give a lot and I think the condition or the status here is very difficult, because if for example you take the list of nine thousand people that were amnestied in October, then we check them with the list of people who were amnestied last year or the year before and you see that the same people are recycled and the people who're amnestied are those who were given or sentences for 21, 5 or 15 years of imprisonment and those who were charged with death or some really difficult offenses, so and political imprisoned prisoners were not freed. And I know that international communities are really happy for 11 people who were released, political prisoners. But in fact we have some cases, reports that the evaluation of their freedom is so high that some people told that they had to pay one million, up to one million in order to gain their freedom.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** No. There's a couple of issues you've raised here. Training in and of itself is not sufficient, but it's an important tool to use to try and bring skills up for those who are trying to change. We believe it's important to try and provide the tools and information to the working-level, so they understand how to do their job and in a way that's consistent with international standards of human rights. And training is part of that, but not all of it. As you noted, part of meeting international standards also is dealing with corruption issues. It also is dealing with reforming some of the legal structures. And what we've heard in our meetings is a commitment to raise up the... Turkmenistan's legal code and to raise up the implementation of those laws to international standards. So the proof is always implementation and so what we have been talking about is how to go about implementing and ways that we can cooperate with civic organizations, with the government to try and ensure the implementation of [inaudible] in a way that does bring Turkmenistan to international standards, as it's good for Turkmenistan it's good for the people of Turkmenistan and its good also for our relationship with Turkmenistan to have that goal and to meet those standards. We know that this is a long process, but we believe it's important to start making steps forward and we think that there is a commitment. We've seen a first couple steps and so we want to see progress and work with everybody in Turkmenistan to try and make that progress continue to happen.

**ITAR-TASS (in Russian):** We're all information agencies here. We're looking for your phrase that would evaluate, State Department - United States evaluation of democratic process here in Turkmenistan. So you were talking about that things are coming, the first steps are taken, so let's say if you could judge or evaluate on five point basis. What would it be 2, 3 or 4? So you said first steps, does it mean that it's 2 or are we in the just very beginning or it's in the middle? Can you evaluate that point of view?

**REUTERS (in Russian):** Additional question: If you could give specific evaluation of the State Department and specific concerns in the field of human rights, violations, specific violations that you're raising with government of Turkmenistan and what is their response?

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** Let me take the second question first. But I will come back to you (referring to ITAR-TASS). On the second question, we have discussed a wide range of issues on both democracy and human rights. I gave the couple of issues on criminal code reform, included in that is how the police work, professionalizing the police, training etc. That's part of it. We've also discussed, as I said before, the issue of commercial media, internet access and information access. We've talked, as I said in my beginning remarks, with the Religious Affairs Council about freedom of religion and how to improve on the record in that area. We've also discussed the important role of civic organizations in any democratic society, having input into the government's decision-making, bringing ideas from the people and also helping educate the people on their rights and how to access those rights with the government. And the important role that plays in any society to encourage further government dialogue with civic organizations here. And we've talked with everybody who we've talked with about importance of international standards on the entire human rights front, including elections on democracy and encouraged continued cooperation with OSCE, with the UNDP on those fronts, and offered our help and expertise across the range of these issues. Which gets a little bit to your question of ranking (referring to ITAR-TASS). I am not a big fan of numerical rankings, because they only take a snap shot in time and don't show anything about trend and trajectory. And in discussions with the Central Election Commission they outlined the steps that they are undertaking with the OSCE, with the UNDP to reform the electoral code. And we think that that's an important process, because international standards on democratic elections are well-established and we see it as a hopeful step; that the election commission of the government are working with these bodies that have so much expertise on how to improve the process and make it more democratic. And so on a trajectory basis I see things moving forward, I see the need to continue to move things forward, because there is a ways to go. But that doesn't mean that the trajectory is not positive, but it doesn't mean that it's at the end.

**PAO:** And last question now.

**Article writer for IWPR and member of Project "Reports Central Asia" (in Russian):** Regarding opening of the Center for Preventive Diplomacy, scheduled to open on December 11 and so it's interesting if you have any idea about the charter of that center, because this might be a very significant and important body here in Turkmenistan that would help to bring all these: freedom of media, freedom of speech, abolishment of that black list and visa regimes. For example, there are sometimes rumors saying that all visas are abolished with Russia, but then we find out that these are just rumors.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** I think having a permanent UN presence at a preventative diplomacy mission is a very positive symbol. It's a very positive thing to have more international community presence here as Turkmenistan undertakes to bring its own efforts up to international standards, but again it's a first step. So they have to see where it goes and what it's able to do once it gets running. Having the center opening is a good first step. So we're eager to see how the center, once it's established, goes about its work and we look forward to seeing opportunities where we can assist with that effort. Because we think it could be a very important and it is an important step and it's an opportunity to help move things forward. So we'll see once it's open.

**REUTERS:** Sorry, one question from my grandmother.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** laughing...

**REUTERS:** If it's possible because it's a...

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** If I could combine your questions. Two of you can ask (in reference to Reuters and Associated Press) then really short, because we do have to go.

**ASSOCIATED PRESS (in Russian):** So you said that the country started moving forward in the right direction. What do you think in the field of human rights and democracy are the next necessary steps the country should take.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** And ask your grandmother's question (referring to REUTERS)

**REUTERS (in Russian):** My grandmother is one of the people who is getting all of the information about outside world from a satellite dish. And now the president has banned all the satellite dishes, which are covering all city buildings, saying that there should be one satellite dish and the Ministry of Communication would be giving access to the channels. So it's probably will be only two channels that will be authorized by the government and nothing else. And she considers it to be big step backward on human rights.

**DAS Barks-Ruggles:** On the next steps on human rights: There are still as your colleague noted a number of prisoners of concern in jail. It's important that those cases be addressed. And if people are going to be charged they'd be charged and tried in an open court and if they're not going to be charged, then they should be released. There's also a number of terrific civic organizations, enormously talented, committed, very patriotic Turkmens, who're working very hard in civic organizations. And we believe that registration of those organizations would be a terrific step forward in helping build government partnership with its own civic organizations and so we've urged that. And on the information front, the opening of internet cafes is very important. We hope to see greater internet access. There's enormous amount of information - business information, distance learning, educational exchange, just unbelievable amount of information on the internet. And we believe that access to that information will help the aspirations of the young people, of Turkmenistan for better jobs, better training, brighter future in the global economy, as well as health. Everybody else knows more about Turkmenistan. We think that's an important step. Which gets to your grandmother and satellite dishes. I have seen thousands of satellite dishes, not only your grandmother's, as I've been driving around town in Ashgabat. I say it in a funny way but it's very important, because people do get their information this way. And we believe any step that would limit information would be a step backwards. So we hope that, however the government decides to handle this question; and I know there's lots of rumors flying; and I am not sure exactly where things stand. But however the government handles this we believe it's important to maintain access to the information that is already flowing into homes all over the Turkmenistan, because it does help improve understanding when people can see and learn about other cultures; and so we would hope that that would be the case. Thank you very much. I appreciate all your time. Thank you again and apologies for the delay.

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