

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 22, 2015

His Excellency Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov  
Oguzkhan Presidential Palace  
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Dear President Berdimuhamedov:

On a number of occasions in recent years, we have written to you regarding the plight of political prisoners held inside Turkmenistan. We appreciate your leadership in addressing several of those cases. Your government has also graciously hosted our staff when visiting Turkmenistan to discuss areas of cooperation and concern. However, a number of prisoners jailed for what appear to be political motives remain, which we hope you can also address with similar equanimity.

In particular, we once again reiterate our appeal for the release of Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, who has been held on questionable charges since 2008. Mr. Annaniyazov was arrested after returning to Turkmenistan from Norway, where he was living as a political refugee. A noted human rights activist, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison for illegal entry into Turkmenistan. Since his arrest, his family has been unable to communicate with him. Numerous groups have raised serious concerns about his charges and sentence. At this point, Mr. Annaniyazov has now served more than half of his sentence. Granting a pardon for Mr. Annaniyazov will demonstrate compassion and leadership and will remove an issue of international contention.

We also wish to raise the case of Bahram Hemdemov. Mr. Hemdemov was arrested in March 2015 for allegedly illegal religious activity and inciting religious hatred, and was sentenced to four years in prison. Yet, his real crime appears to be his membership in the Jehovah's Witnesses faith, one which has been regularly targeted for prosecution in contradiction to Turkmenistan's constitution, which guarantees religious freedom. While many members have been released in the past or detained no more than a few weeks at a time, we believe Mr. Hemdemov received a stiffer penalty simply because he was hosting the Jehovah's Witness meeting in his home at the time the police raided it.

Thank you for your attention to these issues.

Sincerely,



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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



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Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator