



**Submission to the United Nations
Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
Pre-Sessional Working Group, 16-20 June 2014**

An Alternative NGO Report on Turkmenistan

*Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
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The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is the successor organisation of the Helsinki Group of Turkmenistan and was registered as an independent association in Vienna in November 2004. Through a network of local experts and activists inside Turkmenistan, the organisation monitors and reports on the human rights situation in the country. It also disseminates independent news, comments and analysis from and about the country.

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SUMMARY

Despite some vague improvements in the field of education and the recent abolishment of compulsory teaching of the late Turkmen President's Niyazov book *Ruhnama* in all educational establishments, not much has changed in Turkmenistan.

Although article 28 of the Turkmen constitution and the Law of Mass Media guarantee freedom of expression, freedom of opinion and free access to information, but this is mainly academic. There are no independent publications in the country; the Turkmen authorities continue persecuting independent journalists and civil society activists and use different measures to impede free flow of information to Turkmenistan and from the country to the outside world. The Turkmen security services completely control the Internet and regularly block all websites, which might contain suspicious content even those websites used for dating purposes.

The overall state of public health care and sanitary conditions in urban and rural areas in the country is appalling often resulting in the spread of various diseases. The main reasons for this situation are imbalanced allocation of resources for the health care sector; lack of knowledge and the number of health care workers continues to decline; hospitals lack basic medication and medical supplies. The organisation *Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF)* was expelled from Turkmenistan in December 2009 and their subsequent report indicates that the Turkmen authorities exercise pressure on health care workers to meet proscribed quotas when reporting about various diseases. Due to fear of losing their jobs most medical professionals obey and provide falsified information which is why the data about the health situation in the country is almost inaccessible.

Despite of Turkmenistan's substantial gas reserves, the standard of living is quite low with an average salary amounting up to 288 US\$, a high unemployment rate, especially among young people, and almost no measures to support the unemployed. As a consequence of lack of perspective the number of drug-addicts as well as the number of suicides among young people is on the rise. Also access to potable water has not been improved in rural areas and no concrete measures are underway which would suggest that this will improve any time soon.

Private kindergartens in Ashgabat have been closed, while tuition and material conditions in the state-run kindergartens are unsatisfactory. Although compulsory education has been increased to 12 years, the availability of textbooks remains a problem; syllabi are chaotic and often vary from year to year; Turkmen teachers lack adequate training and are often required to teach subjects, which they have no training for; school infrastructure, except in Ashgabat, is unsatisfactory; and the overall knowledge of students is below international standards. Instead of the *Ruhnama*, books by the current President are now a mandatory part of Turkmen education. The number of applicants for universities and colleges is higher than the vacancies available at these institutions and students wishing to study abroad face different administrative obstacles. Turkmen minorities have no opportunity to study in their mother tongue and face various problems when applying for Turkmen universities and colleges.

During a school year a substantial amount of time continues to be spent by the students in participating in different mandatory rehearsals ahead of the numerous state holidays.

As the TIHR report will show the Turkmen authorities only show a limited willingness to comply with their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child ignoring a wide range of recommendations listed in the concluding observation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

INTRODUCTION

This report is an overview of the developments in Turkmenistan since the last session of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2006 and a critical review of the recent report submitted by the Government of Turkmenistan to the CRC.

The death of the first Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov, also known as “Turkmenbashi”, nurtured hopes that the human rights situation in Turkmenistan might improve. Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov, Minister of Health under Niyazov, was inaugurated as the new President in 2007. At the beginning of his first Presidential term in 2007 Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov announced several changes. Despite a number of legal amendments, pledges before international human rights bodies and the creation of a new political party in August 2012, which has turned into an extension of the pro-presidential Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, no substantial changes have taken place in the country. President Berdymuhammedov continues to enjoy unlimited powers, while the Turkmen government dominates all its branches.

Children remain the most vulnerable group in Turkmenistan. Tens of thousands of children grow up without parents, not because they are orphans, but due to high unemployment which forces their parents to leave Turkmenistan in order to find work abroad. The children therefore stay either with their relatives or are sometimes even left on their own.

Although the Turkmen President champions technical development and new technologies, Internet access and its speed have not improved, while rigid censorship and a total control of electronic correspondence remain in place. Highly restricted access to Internet impedes young people, among other things, to learn independently from other sources than those proscribed by the Turkmen authorities and to foster contacts with their peers around the world.

Low qualification of medical professionals; a bad medical infrastructure; horrible sanitary conditions; lack of potable water; inexistent hygienic and ecologic awareness – especially in rural areas – have serious consequences for the children’s health.

Although the years of mandatory education have been prolonged, their quality has not improved and it remains extremely ideology driven. Institutions responsible for the implementation of the reforms still lack a precisely formulated plan, strategic goals and clearly worded objectives to carry out the reform of the educational system. New curricula and textbooks have been developed in a hasty, unsystematic and superficial manner. Since January 2014 the mandatory reading of books by the late President Saparmurat Niyazov has been replaced with the mandatory reading of books by the current President. No major progress has been made with respect to instruction in minority languages. Students wishing to study abroad often face various hurdles, just as those applying for different student exchange programs.

The Turkmen authorities continue to use children for propaganda purposes forcing them to regularly participate in different festivities and celebrations. The children are required to act as a cheering crowd and to glorify the Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov.

All in all, a low level of education; a high rate of diseases, consequently causing a high rate of fatalities; the lack of any perspective due to high unemployment; the lack of any moral and ethical values – parents not paying attention to a decent upbringing of their children and corruption being rampant in all spheres of life – all this impedes mechanisms to protect children’s rights and results in the degradation of the younger generation on a wide scale.

An independent civil society is still inexistent, as the rights to freedom of association and freedom of assembly are still suppressed. The daily work of NGOs is increasingly difficult, as they are not regarded as potentially supportive of the government, but rather as an annoying factor. Even dissidents living outside Turkmenistan have been exposed to threats and pressure from the state authorities: their websites are regularly hacked. It is therefore not surprising that the Turkmen authorities do not prepare state reports together with NGOs, as recommended by different UN bodies.

Due to all the above listed reasons, it is very likely that all major concerns raised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child will not be dealt with and thus there is not much hope that the situation in Turkmenistan will improve any time soon.

1. Civil rights and freedoms (arts. 13 and 17)

According to section C, point 32 of the Concluding observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about the fact that all sources of information - and media in particular - are subject to Government's control and do not allow for diversity. The Committee therefore recommended that Turkmenistan should "*ensure the right of the child to access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources. (...)*". **The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)** would like to stress that nothing has changed since the last Committee's session on Turkmenistan: all media in the country are under tight state control; Turkmen citizens have almost no access to independent Turkmen and international mass media; and the Turkmen secret services completely control the Internet and regularly block all websites, including those for dating purposes, which might contain suspicious contents.

On 4 January 2013 the Law on Mass Media came into effect, which is the first law of its kind since Turkmenistan's independence. The law prohibits censorship; enables natural and legal persons as well as civil society organisations to establish media outlets and to launch Internet publications and websites; and it also guarantees the right to access information and international mass media. Nevertheless, the Turkmen authorities continue to impose obstacles on Turkmen citizens to stop them from enjoying these rights and to continue with censorship practice.

Following the launch of the law, the Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov ceased to be the founder of the country's print media outlets and announced that a number of ministries and state agencies must assume this function. It should be noted that all of the heads of these state authorities are appointed by presidential decree and that the change of ownership might even increase control of the Turkmen media and the new owners will become just another regulatory authority.¹ In their annual reports Freedom House and Reporters without Borders have ranked

¹ Deutsche Welle: "Туркменским СМИ пообещали немного свободы", 25 January 2013, <http://www.dw.de/%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BC-%D1%81%D0%BC%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%89%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%8B/a-16545601>; Eurasianet.org: "Turkmenistan: President Gives Up Newspaper Ownership, But Control?", 22 February 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66590>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Founder replaced by owners", 4 March (28 February) 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/03/founder-replaced-by-owners/>; <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/02/uchreditelya-smenili-osnovateli/>

Turkmenistan as one of the world's most repressive regimes and ranked the country at the bottom of their freedom indices.²

INTERNET

In 2007 the Turkmen President promised to improve access to the Internet. According to available data only 7.2% of the Turkmen population use the Internet, while there are 76,5 mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants³. Since 2008 the Internet can be also accessed from homes upon submitting a written application to the local office of the state-run provider Turkmen Telecom. According to official data 13.7% of the households have a computer and 6.7% have Internet access at home⁴.

Private unlimited ADSL Internet connections are available and according to the Turkmen Telecom the costs range between 35 US\$/month (128 KB/s) and 210 US\$/month (512 KB/sec)⁵. It should be noted that the use of ADSL Internet connection is not widely spread as most of the households are connected via telephone lines, which make the Internet speed extremely slow⁶. In 2013 the Turkmen Telecom increased Internet rates by 70%, without improving the quality of services and an average Turkmen customer must pay 321 manats (\$112) on a monthly basis and can download 4GB data per month.⁷ It should be noted that according to official information, an average monthly salary amounts to 820 manats (288 US\$)⁸.

No privacy is guaranteed for Turkmen Internet users as the Turkmen secret services read e-mails and have introduced special filters to block all black-listed websites.⁹ Suspended in December 2010, the work of the Russian Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) was re-launched in September 2012, but its prices do not differ substantially from the Turkmen provider, so many users continue to use services by the local provider Altyn Asyr.¹⁰

² Freedom House: Freedom of the Press 2013, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/turkmenistan#.Uu_b8tGA3IU; Reporters without Borders: 2013 World Press Freedom Index, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html>

³ 2012 statistics from International Telecommunications Union (ITU), at <http://www.itu.int/net4/itu-d/icteye/CountryProfileReport.aspx%3FcountryID%3D279&sa=U&ei=32fzUojrDKac4wSiglHoDw&ved=0CAcQFjAC&client=internal-uds-cse&usq=AFQjCNGyhcmFwH9mtdEQqj5WCRjnhOB1YQ>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ According to rates quoted at the website of Turkmentelecom, at <http://www.online.tm/tarifs>

⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Internet is not accessible for Turkmen officials", 5 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/738>; "MTS is a step behind", 5 November 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/771>; "В 4 раза медленнее, в 7 — дороже. Тарифы на интернет", 12 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/10/v-4-raza-medlennee-v-7-dorozhe-tarifyi-na-Internet/>; Blog Ruslana T.: "В 4 раза медленнее, в 7 - дороже. Тарифы на интернет в Туркменистане и Австрии", 12 October 2012, <http://chrono-tm.blogspot.co.at/2012/10/4-7.html>

⁷ Alternative Turkmen News, <https://www.facebook.com/adalat.seeker>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Internet rates increased", 10 February 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/03/Internet-rates-increased/>

⁸ According to a decree issued by the President of Turkmenistan in July 2011, as of 1 January 2012, the average monthly salary in the country will be considered to be 820 manat when pension payments are calculated. See «Зарплаты бюджетников, пенсии и стипендии будут повышены на 10 процентов», 11.7.2011, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/articles/36213.html>

⁹ TIHR Report: "Turkmenistan. Human Rights in the Era of Grate Renaissance", February 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/5905833640537837.pdf>

¹⁰ HT Podcast: "МТС получил все разрешения на возобновление работы в Туркменистане", 26 May 2012, <http://chrono.podfm.ru/my/5>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Internet is not accessible for Turkmen officials", 5 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/738>; "MTS is a step behind", 5 November 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/771>; "В 4 раза медленнее, в 7 — дороже. Тарифы на интернет", 12 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/10/v-4-raza-medlennee-v-7-dorozhe-tarifyi-na-Internet/>; Blog Ruslana T.: "В 4 раза медленнее, в 7 - дороже. Тарифы на интернет в Туркменистане и Австрии", 12 October 2012, <http://chrono-tm.blogspot.co.at/2012/10/4-7.html>

Currently there are not more than 15 cybercafés, all of which were opened in Turkmenistan since 2007, with an average cost of 1 US\$ per hour¹¹. In order to use a cybercafé one must show one's ID and register in a logbook indicating Internet surfing time. All ID data are entered into a record book and later sent to a local MNS office.¹²

On several occasions the Turkmen President issued an order to provide newly built elementary schools with computers¹³, but in most of the schools there is no Internet access and the computers are regularly locked up by school administration.

Since 2011, on the first day of school, each Turkmen first-grader was handed a notebook on behalf of the President, although these were bought by their parents upon request of the school administration. Actually the pupils were only allowed to keep these notebooks for the first day of school after which the computers were locked up in the school. Following the instruction of the Ministry of Education the pupils were not allowed to take the gift home with them, not even during their holidays. Wealthy parents also had to provide money for window-bars for each class and safe deposit boxes for the notebooks as well as other computer equipment, but did not receive any receipt for the amount paid. As no receipts were handed out, school directors, supply managers and class supervisors could use the money as they pleased.¹⁴

The Turkmen authorities regularly block access to YouTube and Twitter as well as to different **social sites** such as Facebook and Odnoklassniki.ru¹⁵. Facebook has 12,060 Turkmen users, but their number is decreasing¹⁶. Also the Turkmen Internet forum Ertir.com which has some 8000 users has been blocked for two weeks in 2012.

The Internet forum Ertir.com, which is one of the most popular web resources among the Turkmen youth, was hacked on 1 June 2012 and remained inaccessible for two weeks after which it continued to work without interruptions. Those users who accessed the website via proxy servers did not find any information about the website facing technical problems, but they were unable to leave any posts during those two weeks. Although no information was provided as to why the website was offline it is very likely that some of the discussions upset the Turkmen authorities. Although sports, movies and dating are the main content of the posts, the young users have also started to address problems they face in daily life as well as political and religious issues. The forum Ertir.com was launched in May 2009.¹⁷

¹¹ Reporters without Borders, Turkmenistan profile, <http://en.rsf.org/Internet-enemie-turkmenistan,39772.html>

¹² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "What is to be done? Or what has been done?", 25 January 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/01/what-is-to-be-done-or-what-has-been-done/>; "Turkmenistan: Still Waiting for the Second Step", 19 October 2009, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1180>; "Turkmen Internet", 16 June 2009, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=681>

¹³ Turkmenistan.ru: "Bayramali children get new school in honor of Flag Day", 16 February 2012, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/en/articles/15905.html>

¹⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Useless gift", 31 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/07/useless-gift/>; "School auctions are over", 5 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/10/school-auctions-are-over/>

¹⁵ Podcast "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Власти Туркменистана блокируют доступ к «YouTube», «Facebook» и «Twitter»", 29 November 2012, <http://chrono.podfm.ru/my/43/>; News Asia: "Власти Туркменистана блокируют доступ к социальным сетям «YouTube», «Facebook» и «Twitter»", 26 November 2012, <http://www.news-asia.ru/view/tm/topical/3884>; Alternative Turkmenistan News, <https://www.facebook.com/adalat.seeker>

¹⁶ Turkmenistan - Facebook Pages Statistics&Number of Fans, <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-pages/country/turkmenistan/>

¹⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Popular forum blocked in Turkmenistan", 5 June 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/465>; Blog Ruslana T.: "Ertir.com ожил", 13 June 2012, <http://chrono->

Independent news and websites of the Turkmen opposition and of dissidents as well as proxy servers are under regular attack by the Turkmen secret service. The TIHR website “Chronicles of Turkmenistan” was hacked on several occasions since 2010. On 5^h December 2012 it was hacked the last time and remained inaccessible for one month after publishing an article about the death of two students who died during a rehearsal in Ashgabat¹⁸. The website has some 2.000 visits per day and is one of the few independent sources of information from and about Turkmenistan.

In June 2010, staff members of the Dashoguz velayat’s Ministry of National Security (MNS) office paid several visits to a local school, in an attempt to find out where and when the sons of Farid Tukhbatullin, a Turkmen dissident living in Austria and chief-editor of the website “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”, studied and who their classmates were. Both sons have published satirical cartoons featuring Turkmen leaders and have posted them on TurkmenDissidentTV¹⁹. At the time the older son was hosting a forum²⁰, which was published on the website. The Turkmen authorities have become increasingly worried about the outreach of the forum and its possible effects on the political situation in the country.²¹

The Turkmen secret services also hack passwords, read the e-mail correspondence and they often block access to **e-mail accounts**.

Ahead of the inauguration of President Berdymuhammedov and celebrations of the National Flag Day in February 2012, Gmail accounts were blocked for ten days in order to prevent Turkmen Internet users from reporting about the events.²²

Messaging communication services, which are very popular among the Turkmen youth, were also under attack by the Turkmen authorities:

Cell phone applications Wechat and Line, which are free of charge, have been blocked since November 2013. Young people regularly sent photos and chatted with people from all over the world via the applications, and they also exchanged audio files, many of them containing hip-hop music, which is very popular, but forbidden by the Turkmen authorities. In autumn 2012 messengers Whatsapp and Viber were also blocked and they remain inaccessible until today. Although no official explanation was provided why these applications were blocked, it is very likely that the option to encrypt outgoing and incoming messages was the reason for blocking them.²³

TELEVISION

Television remains one of the most important mainstream mass media and is used as a propaganda tool by the Turkmen authorities. Although several new TV channels were launched, not a single airing

tm.blogspot.co.at/2012/06/ertircom.html; "Еще раз об Ertir.com", 15 June 2012, http://chrono-tm.blogspot.co.at/2012/06/ertircom_15.html

¹⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Погибай на репетиции", 2.12.2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/12/pogibay-na-repetitsii/>; "Statement by the editorial board of “Chronicles of Turkmenistan” ", 6 January 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/01/statement-by-the-editorial-board-of-chronicles-of-turkmenistan/>

¹⁹ TurkmenDissidentTV, at <http://www.freedomforsale.org>

²⁰ TIHR Forum, at <http://chrono-tm.2x2forum.com/>

²¹ TIHR, „Chronicles of Turkmenistan“: “The son for the father”, 9 June 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1388>

²² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Gmail disabled in Turkmenistan", 21 February 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/376/>; "Короткие сообщения", 26 February 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/02/korotkie-soobshheniya-2/>

²³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Messengers are blocked in Turkmenistan", 22 November 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/11/messengers-are-blocked-in-turkmenistan/>; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): "Рэп — голос протеста туркменской молодежи против репрессий", 22 February 2012, http://rus.azattyq.org/content/turkmenistan_rap_mokhamadi_maru_/24491128.html

can be made in the country's state-controlled TV without previous approval by the Turkmen authorities. The same applies for recorded entertainment programs, TV series and newscasts by the Russian 'Channel 1'²⁴.

*Following the first ever direct airing of the European Football Championship in 2012 in Turkmenistan, the sport commentators were required to express gratitude to the Turkmen President for providing such a privilege for the Turkmen nation.*²⁵

Foreign TV channels are accessible in Turkmenistan via **satellite dishes** and Turkmen citizens often watch Russian and Turkish TV channels mainly for language reasons²⁶. Despite the fact that the Russian channels are under control of the Russian authorities and Turkish channels often provide various soap operas this does not stop the Turkmen authorities from being suspicious of their content.

*In autumn 2011 President Berdymuhammedov issued the order to remove satellite dishes from the buildings in Ashgabat arguing that they ruin the skyline of the city. Instead, he insisted on installing cable TV in multi-story buildings, allowing only two or three satellite dishes per building. Due to the amount of work, which this assignment caused, it was later decided to only remove satellite dishes from the buildings along the main avenue, which is frequently used by the President and his entourage. The change was supposed to prevent the Turkmen population, including children and youth, from obtaining any information not under state control. Such an attempt was already made in 2008, when satellite dishes were dismantled from the apartment blocks in the center of Ashgabat.*²⁷

MUSIC

Hip-hop and rap music is very popular among Turkmen youth, but it is forbidden by the Turkmen authorities. Most of the songs are secretly recorded and distributed via YouTube and cell phones. Recording in studios is only allowed for music with patriotic content, a practice dating back to the rule of the late President Niyazov. The website www.100de100hiphop.com, which used to publicize Turkmen rap music, was blocked in February 2012 and remains inaccessible.²⁸

Even singers performing love songs have been persecuted by the Turkmen authorities:

*Maksat Kakabaev, known as Maro, gave a concert in January 2011 in Turkey. Following the concert Maro gave an interview to a Turkish TV channel and was arrested upon returning to Turkmenistan. Together with another singer Murad Overzov, he was charged with dubious criminal charges a month later. Apart from the interview, Maro's song entitled "Wake up, wake up!" was a further reason for him to be charged, as the wording of the song was perceived as a political appeal to oppose the regime by the Turkmen authorities. Both singers were released from imprisonment in February 2013 although it is not clear whether at that point they had already completed the full term sentence or if their release was prompted by a letter of 24 members of the European Parliament.*²⁹

²⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Out of the loop", 16 November 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/11/out-of-the-loop/>

²⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Спасибо Аркадагу за футбольные трансляции!", 18 June 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/06/spasibo-arkadagu-za-futbol/>

²⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "F. Tuxhatullin's interview to television channel K-plus", 14 April 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1654>

²⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Wandering aerals", 13 September 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/60;>

²⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): "Рэп — голос протеста туркменской молодежи против репрессий", 22 February 2012, http://rus.azattyq.org/content/turkmenistan_rap_mokhamadi_maro_/24491128.html

²⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Popular Turkmen singers released from imprisonment", 4 March 2013, [http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/03/popular-turkmen-singers-released-from-imprisonment/;](http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/03/popular-turkmen-singers-released-from-imprisonment/) "Maro is still

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Abolish excessive control of the work of media and refrain from using state media as tools of ideological propaganda;
- Protect children's right to seek and receive information from outside Turkmenistan by putting an end to measures that restrict the use of satellite channels and access to foreign media;
- Refrain from systematic filtering, censoring or blocking of online content, and do not restrict access to such content simply because it contains information that the Turkmen authorities do not like or agree with. Ensure that any measures to limit access to online content deemed illegal is strictly limited to that specific content, is absolutely necessary and is sanctioned through an impartial court decision subject to appeal;
- Ensure that internet users are allowed to freely use social networking sites and online forums of their choice for discussion and that their interactions on such sites are not monitored or restricted in violation of international human rights law;
- Put an end to the campaign to dismantle private satellite antennas, which violates international standards protecting the right to receive information regardless of frontiers as well as the right to privacy.

2. Basic health and welfare (Articles 18, para 3; 24, paras 1 and 2 b-e; 26; 27, paras. 1-3, of the Convention)

HEALTH AND ACCESS TO HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

According to section C, point 52 a) and b) of the Concluding observations, the CRC recommended that the State party should strengthen its efforts to ensure "the provision of necessary medical assistance and health care access to all children with emphasis on the development of primary health care" as well as to provide "*hospitals with sufficient obstetric supplies and emergency medicines*". TIHR would like to call the Committee's attention that no substantial changes have been made in this regard.

The horrific situation in the Turkmen health sector is the legacy of late President Niyazov, who at some point decided that "health care system should be profitable and must bring revenue into the state budget". The current authorities have not undertaken significant steps to improve this: allocation of funds is more than imbalanced; knowledge and the number of health care personnel continues to decrease; and most hospitals lack basic medications and medical supplies. Knowledge of general practitioners is very modest and they often prescribe wrong medication. Indications for *Caesarian* sections are poorly understood and surgical techniques are out-dated.³⁰

A number of **hospitals** across Turkmenistan has been closed. The decision to close the hospital for tuberculosis in Ashgabat at the end of 2003, which had the capacity to treat tens of thousands of patients per year, was made following a suggestion by Niyazov's Minister of Health and the current Turkmen President - Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov. There is no exact number for TBC patients in Turkmenistan, but many Turkmen physicians claim that it is extremely high.

serving sentence in Bairamali colony", 4 March 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/03/maro-is-still-serving-sentence-in-bairamali-colony/>; "В Туркменистане сажают в тюрьму за исполнение песен про любовь", 21 February 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/?id=2990>; Joint letter to by 24 MEPs to Turkmenistan's Brussels ambassador Kakadjan Mommadov: http://barbara-lochbihler.de/cms/upload/PDF_2013/MEP_letter_to_Ambassador_of_Turkmenistan.pdf

³⁰Medecins sans Frontieres: "*Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System*", 12 April 2010, http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf

The hospital treating TBC patients was not only transferred to the village Dushak in the Kahkin district, some 200 kilometres outside of Ashgabat, but was also plagued by poor sanitary conditions, lack of heating during the winter and lack of basic medications. Many TBC patients refused to travel that far and a year later the Turkmen authorities had to involve police to bring the patients to the hospital. In 2010 a TBC department was reopened in Ashgabat as well as a TBC centre in the village Choganlyi, although the latter does not treat patients who already have advanced TBC symptoms, but sends them to the centre in Dushak. Many doctors who previously worked in the closed TBC hospital in Ashgabat opened private practices and charge up to 200-250 US\$ for monthly TBC treatment excluding medication costs. As the Turkmen authorities have forbidden the sale of antibiotics based on prescriptions by private practitioners in 2012, these are now sold on the black market for the 20-fold of the previous price.³¹

Pregnant women are, theoretically, entitled to free post-natal care services, but numerous user fees impede the care for many women. Delivering women must take to the delivery wards not only clothing and bedding, but also basic supplies (such as cotton, antiseptics ...). Despite the obligatory bribes, most of the staff does not even pretend to do their job.³² During the recent construction boom, several new medical centres were built and provided with the newest equipment, which staff often does not know how to use.

A healthcare practitioner from the neurological department of the Saparmurat Niyazov hospital in Ashgabat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that during 2012 9891 children were hospitalised due to different diseases of the central nervous system (CNS). The same source provided also information for the first three months of 2013:

In the beginning of 2013 638 children³³ were hospitalised and diagnosed with a wide range of CNS diseases: children's cerebral palsy (247); residual encephalopathy (214); perinatal encephalopathy (51); neuritis (22); congenital diastrophic displasia (21); consequences of neuro-infection (20); convulsive disorder (19); hydrocephalus (12); encephalitis (3); meningoencephalitis (4); consequences of meningo-encephalitis (8); cerebropathy (8); the Down syndrome (5); microcephaly (4); encephalitis (3). The diseases are caused by the drug-addiction of parents; incest practices; malnutrition as well as pollution of the environment. It should be noted that these are official data and they refer to only one hospital, which is why the comprehensive and nationwide number is much higher.³⁴

Turkmen media have never reported on the spread of any pandemic disease since the country's independence in 1991, as all information about natural disasters and epidemic diseases is considered "classified" information by the Turkmen authorities and may not be reported via mass media. Due to fear of losing their jobs most medical professionals obey and provide falsified information.³⁵ In order to preserve the picture of a healthy Turkmen nation, the Turkmen authorities, especially the Turkmen President, have even proclaimed World Health Day (7 April) as a Turkmen national holiday.

In November 2008 an outbreak of **viral hepatitis** spread in the Dashoguz region caused by the poor quality of drinking water. Wards in local hospital were overcrowded by patients although no precise

³¹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Туберкулез", 16 July 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/07/tuberkulez/>

³²TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Maternity hospitals on self service", 6 January 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1251>

³³ between 0-16 years

³⁴TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Немного статистики о здоровье", 2 April 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/04/nemnogo-statistiki-o-zdorove/>; "Some statistics on sick children", 15 October 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/10/some-statistics-on-sick-children/>

³⁵TIHR Report: "On the state of freedom of the mass media, the right to freedom of speech and free access to information in Turkmenistan", September 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1261840123.pdf>; Medecins sans Frontieres: "Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System", 12 April 2010 at http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf

information on the total number of cases was available, as all relevant healthcare data were classified³⁶. During the outbreak of **swine flu** in 2009 doctors were forbidden to diagnose acute respiratory viral infection or disease. Although more than 150 persons died, including pregnant women and children, the Turkmen authorities denied any causalities of the disease³⁷. **Pernicious pneumonia** which broke out at the same time as swine flu was required to be diagnosed as bronchitis and many patients who were on the verge of dying were requested to leave hospitals³⁸. In 2011 and 2012 many children in the day-care centres of Ashgabat, a village close to the capital and in the Lebap region were diagnosed with **trachoma**. The Turkmen authorities issued no warning about the spread of the disease and no preventive measures were taken by the Turkmen healthcare services.³⁹

*In March 2010 Ashgabat was hit by **pediculosis** with many apartment blocks, kindergartens and schools being exposed to a mass invasion of bedbugs and lice. The local centres for public health and disease control were unable to provide disinfectants and Ashgabat residents had no other option than to clean and disinfect their living quarters themselves.⁴⁰*

*In July 2012 many cases of **measles** were recorded in Ashgabat and its surroundings. It was even claimed, unofficially, that one could speak of an outbreak of the disease. Not only children were affected, but also young people because many of them were not inoculated in their childhood.⁴¹*

Turkmenistan also has a serious lack of **pharmacies** and consequently the **supply of medication is also restricted**, but even when medication is available many patients are not aware that they have the right to free medication and therefore they buy it themselves before going to a hospital. The supply of medication in rural areas is even worse, as pharmacies lack basic medication such as analgesics. Medication is frequently sold at local bazaars for the fivefold price. Vendors keep it usually under-the-counter and keep it in bags without fulfilling basic hygienic requirements.⁴²

Although the Turkmen authorities recently launched a drug-combating campaign, which was to impose restrictions on the sale of strong pain-killers in pharmacies, medication sold at local bazaars is easily available. Involvement of children in cotton-harvesting has been forbidden since 2005, but in rural areas children must often help their parents on the cotton fields or go there instead of their teachers. In order to avoid potential problems for sending their pupils to the cotton fields, the teachers make an agreement with the heads of the farmers' associations beforehand who give their consent to the practice. Many girls from rural areas are therefore taking pain-killers, such as "Tramadol" in order to overcome fatigue to be able to cope with their school obligations as well as their work on the cotton-field.⁴³

³⁶TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Only frost will kill hepatitis", 19 November 2008, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=615>

³⁷ TIHR, „Chronicles of Turkmenistan“: „Comments“, 2 December 2009, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1228>; Medecins sans Frontieres: "Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System", 12 April 2010, http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf

³⁸TIHR, „Chronicles of Turkmenistan“: „Comments“, 2 December 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1228>

³⁹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Trachoma in the epoch of power and happiness", 27 September 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/09/trachoma-in-the-epoch-of-power-and-happiness/>

⁴⁰TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Lice-ridden Ashgabat", 31 March 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1321>

⁴¹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Measles outbreak", 17 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/07/measles-outbreak/>

⁴²TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Pharmaceuticals bazaar", 10 May 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=671>; "Чёрный рынок медикаментов", 3 June 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/06/chyornyy-ryinok-medikamentov/>

⁴³TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Stimulants for female cotton harvesters", 3 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/10/stimulants-for-female-cotton-harvesters/>

HIV/AIDS

Concerns of the Committee listed in section C, point 53 of the Concluding observations remain in place. According to the TIHR information, no measures have been taken by the State party with regard to the Committees recommendations which are listed under points 54 b-d.

Since their independence the CIS countries have experienced multiple changes many of which have strongly affected children. Information about sexually transmitted diseases in the region, particularly in Turkmenistan, is scarce since sexuality is often considered an indecent topic. Young people completely lack knowledge about safe sex and ads on state-run television promoting use of condoms are almost inexistent.

Information about the status of HIV/AIDS in Turkmenistan is more than limited and the Turkmen authorities have not undertaken a wide-scale campaign to inform its citizens about the disease and preventive measures. The exact number of cases is not known, but the high number of drug-addicts and Turkmen citizens working abroad are often sources of the disease. Many women who work as housekeepers or maids in Turkey and Russia are often victims of sexual abuse and some of them were also infected by HIV/AIDS.

The Turkmen physicians are quite reluctant to diagnose the disease also because many of them are not familiar with its symptoms and often fear repercussions by the authorities if they diagnose HIV/AIDS.⁴⁴ MFS also reported that the National Centre for AIDS Prevention in Ashgabat was closed following a resolution signed by President Berdymuhammedov on 15 April 2010.⁴⁵

Not a single state measure has been available to help drug-addicted parents who are often source of AIDS transmission to their children:

*In villages on the border with Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, many women and men have become drug-addicts. Although many cases of children from these regions born with physiological and psychological problems are documented, no parents' support groups or community-based rehabilitation programmes were established within Turkmenistan.*⁴⁶

ADOLESCENT HEALTH

Concerns of the Committee listed in section C, point 53 of the Concluding observations remain in place. According to the TIHR information, no measures have been taken by the State party with regard to the Committees recommendations which are listed under points 54 b) and d).

Before 2006, **drugs** were sold unhindered across Turkmenistan. According to Central Asia Online, for every 100,000 residents there were 4000 drug addicts. While drug dealing was punished, possession and use of drugs was not. In the town of Kunyaurgench whole families, including children, sold heroine - often in their homes and even per kilo. In order to avoid being arrested, adults sent minors to buy drugs, often for their own use. In May 2008 a first grader from one of the Dashoguz schools was detained with a bag of heroine, which he had bought for his older brother, but the minor was

⁴⁴TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Steps are taken, results are not visible", 28 April 2007, at <http://achive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=343>

⁴⁵Medecins sans Frontieres: "Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System", 12 April 2010 at http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf; M&C News: "AIDS spreads with migrant work in Central Asia", at http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/health/features/article_1571910.php/AIDS-spreads-with-migrant-work-in-Central-Asia-News-Feature

⁴⁶TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Drugs are running low", 11 March 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1309>

unaware of the bag's content. Two more children bought drugs for their parents' consumption, but, after being caught, were not taken in custody.⁴⁷

In 2008 the Turkmen authorities launched a nationwide drive to cut back drug abuse and drug addiction and currently there are allegedly only 140 drug addicts per 100,000 residents in the country. A campaign against drug abuse has been also launched which includes visits to different educational establishments; broadcasting about the problem on TV programmes; an even a drug hotlines have been set up. The authorities also established the State Service for Drug Control. A part of the efforts was aimed at ensuring security at the country's borders, primarily those with Afghanistan. According to the agency, several hundred drug dealers were sentenced since and were ineligible for pardon.⁴⁸ However, the measures are not implemented systematically and procedures in dealing with young drug-addicts are often inappropriate and harsh.

In 2011 a student from a 9th grade in Dashoguz was sentenced to 12 years in prison. She was sentenced together with a deputy director of her school and several other drug dealers.⁴⁹

In February 2014, a student of an Ashgabat secondary school was brought to an Ashgabat hospital due to symptoms of poisoning. He was taken blood and medical practitioners from the hospital detected traces of opiates. Soon after the law-enforcement authorities, the Ministry of Healthcare and the Ministry of Education were informed of the incident and large-scale inspections were launched in all schools of the capital. All schoolchildren were urged to undergo a blood test to check for drug substances. It remains unknown what will happen with those students whose tests are positive.⁵⁰

Suicide among young people is a serious problem in Turkmenistan and their number has increased since 2008. In 2012 young people between 15-35 years committed suicide on a daily basis with one suicide per 3000-4000 inhabitants. The number of incidents may be even higher because many relatives do not wish to reveal suicides among young family members. Local police stations also avoid mentioning too many suicides in their reports, as they fear potential repercussions for not keeping the situation under control. The reasons for suicides differ, but they are often a result of high unemployment, lack of perspective and hopelessness in general; a limited number of places at Turkmen universities; involuntary pregnancies, etc. Young people often feel neglected as they can neither talk to parents about their problems, due to the traditional upbringing, nor can they turn to schools for help.

As many parents are leaving Turkmenistan in order to find job, they often leave their children either with their grandparents or even alone. Due to lack of much attention, some children turn either aggressive or they commit suicide by drinking vinegar or by taking diphenylhydramine. Since mid-2009, many Turkmen schools have been inspected by different Turkmen authorities in order to identify students whose parents have left the country.⁵¹

⁴⁷TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Zero results in combating drugs", 18 February 2008, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1052>; "Drugs and children", 23 May 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=896>

⁴⁸Central Asia Online: "Turkmenistan works to eradicate drug addiction", 24 September 2013, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/09/24/feature-01; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Zero results in combating drugs", 18 February 2008, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1052>; "Drugs and children", 23 May 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=896>;

⁴⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Drug dealing in schools", 20 September 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/09/drug-dealing-in-schools/>

⁵⁰ "Ashgabat schools search for drug addicts", 10 February 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/02/ashgabat-schools-search-for-drug-addicts/>

⁵¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Золотая молодежь. Кто окрашивает её жизнь в серые тона?", 21 November 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/11/zolotaya-molodezh/>; "Abandoned by parents", 8 May

Byagul Nurmyradova, Deputy Prime Minister for Culture, made a proposal in 2014 to persecute healthcare practitioners performing **hymenorrhaphy** (hymen reconstruction surgery). Following the proposal the Turkmen authorities decided to conduct check-ups of young women and the results suggest that not all female senior graders were virgins. One of the reasons why young women lose their virginity is due to money: wealthy Turkmen men are ready to pay up to 1500 US\$ in order to spend a night with a virgin.

Turkmen customs require that young women should be virgins at their wedding day which is why bed linens are often checked after the wedding night. Young women turn therefore to health care practitioners ahead of their marriage: not only that the hymenorrhaphy costs 400 US\$ and even more, but it is performed illegally and often in unsanitary conditions.⁵²

STANDARD OF LIVING

The TIHR would like to note that no measures were taken by the Turkmen authorities to address recommendations under section C, point 58 of the Concluding observations.

Although the unemployment is often denied by the Turkmen authorities it ranges up to 40% in cities and even up to 60% in rural areas where a pension is often the only regular source of income for the entire family. Families without a regular salary or pension survive with occasional jobs and children often collect empty bottles or sell chewing-gum to ensure their living.⁵³ More and more young people face problem to find a job and their number has increased up to 70-80.000 unemployed per year. Many of them are involved in drug-selling in order to ensure source of income.⁵⁴

The bad economic situation is also reflected by the **population decrease** within the country. Despite the government's efforts to revitalise the tradition of large families, which used to be common some 15 years ago, only few large families remained, especially those with eight or more children⁵⁵. The population decline is a result of several reasons: high living costs; migration of Turkmen citizens to other countries; drug addiction; an ailing healthcare system and impoverishment due to mass unemployment. Many employees often do not receive their monthly salaries on time, let alone additional wages and must therefore find other ways to cover their living costs. In some kindergartens the kitchen staff often does not earn more than 28 US\$ per month and thus compensates the lack of money by taking home food from their workplaces⁵⁶. A family of four persons including two adults and two children spends up to 1200-1300 manats (420-455 US\$) per month only for food.⁵⁷

The honorary title "Ene mähri" ("Mother's love") established in July 2008 is awarded to mothers of eight and more children and most of them live in the Turkmen provinces. Besides free dental prosthetics and free public transport they obtain no financial support for their children.

2009, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=912><http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=912>; "Молодежь и суицид", 18 June 2008, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/?id=511>

⁵² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen Deputy Prime Minister is concerned about virginity issues", <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/02/turkmen-deputy-prime-minister-is-concerned-about-virginity-issues/>

⁵³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmenistan. Unemployment in numbers", 7 April 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=659>

⁵⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Zero results in combating drugs", 18 February 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1052>

⁵⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Large families are uncommon in today's Turkmenistan", 25 March 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1054>

⁵⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "How can I stop stealing?", 1 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1146>

⁵⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Salaries and prices", 10 December 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/12/salaries-and-prices/>

allocated a stable without basic sanitary conditions and were never provided with adequate accommodation.⁶⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Improve the overall state of public health care and sanitary conditions; increase the number of medical institutions and provide them with further equipment; ensure systematic education and increase the number of medical professionals in Turkmenistan;
- Ensure that medical staff informs patients about their right to free medication and provide pharmacies, especially those in rural areas, with a sufficient supply of medication. The Turkmen authorities should also undertake measures to combat corruption and the black market for medication, which enables minors to an easy access to prescription medication;
- Increase efforts in providing the Turkmen population, especially the Turkmen youth, with comprehensive information about the spread of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases. The Turkmen authorities should also make sure that there is adequate treatment for such diseases and that the affected youth can obtain adequate medical treatment without fear of being discriminated and without fear of consequences after turning to medical institutions for help;
- Take measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases by undertaking concrete steps and not by following a practice of covering up and denying their existence;
- Take measures to stop suicides among young people by creating crisis centres; by conducting public campaigns and by training school staff, especially school psychologists, to provide the young people with support in order to overcome crisis situations;
- Take measures to reduce the widespread unemployment and support the unemployed youth by providing them with sufficient alternatives upon finishing their education;
- Ensure that the Turkmen population, especially those in rural areas, has adequate access to potable water and take measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases due a lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

3. Education, leisure and cultural activities (arts. 28, para 1 c and e, and para 3; 29; 31 of the Convention)

TIHR would like to call the Committee's attention that with an exception of point 60 b, no serious measures were taken by the Turkmen authorities to fulfil recommendation under point 60 a as well as recommendations under point 60 c-h.

Since Niyazov's death in December 2006, some improvements in the Turkmen educational system have been made, although most of them are only a mere formality and lack substance. In 2013 the time for compulsory education was raised to twelve years and the duration of studies at universities was restored to five years already in 2007. In September 2013 Niyazov's book *Ruhnama* was excluded from the educational curricula, but it has now been replaced by a number of books written by the current President. Health education was also restored, but was curtailed to such an extent that it even endangers the students' health.

Millions of dollars are allocated for the **construction of Ashgabat schools** by cladding them in marble and putting fountains in their backyards. But this cannot be perceived as an improvement of school

⁶⁵TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Construction and demolition projects", 20 April 2010 at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1347>; "Delayed reaction", 14 June 2011, at <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1698>; "Rally organizers detained", 23 June 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1703>; "Life in a pig house and residence registration on the seesaw", 9 February 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/02/life-in-a-pig-house-and-residence-registration-on-the-seesaw/>

facilities and it is rather the continuation of Niyazov's policy to "improve the appearance of the capital". The overwhelming majority of schools in the Turkmen provinces date back to the 1950s and 1970s, many of them made of clay with tiny classrooms and lacking basic equipment.

Following comprehensive inspections launched in early 2013 by the Ministry of Education, all Ashgabat schools were visited by officials of the Ministry. The results of the inspections were extremely poor with **the students' performance index** in Ashgabat barely over 10%, while in the capital's outskirts the students' performance index was even lower. Schools No. 55, No. 83, No. 84 and the "Rukhnama" school in Ashgabat that are considered as elite schools did not even surpass 30% of the index. The classes in these schools are overcrowded with up to 40 students in a single class although a 2007 law requires that classes with more than 34 students should be split in two. Finally, although the schools are equipped with computers and interactive boards they are not used and they are often locked by the school administration.⁶⁶

The wide scale **corruption** in the country also affects education – from kindergartens up to universities. In order to be admitted to a good school; to the few schools with Russian classes or to ensure admission to a university parents are requested to pay bribes. The extent of the bribes is randomly determined, mostly by school directors, school supervisors and/or the local school administration.⁶⁷ Parents are regularly requested to provide money for school supplies; food and drinking water; sportswear as well as presents for teachers. Together with teachers parents must also finance repairs in kindergartens and schools. School administrations often deduct the requested amount of money from the teachers' salaries for this purpose.⁶⁸

Authorities responsible for the implementation of **the educational reform** lack a precise plan, strategic goals and clearly worded objectives. New curricula are either developed hastily and unsystematically, without comparing them to the curricula of countries that comply with international standards or they simply do not exist. Almost every year new subjects come up that are soon replaced by others.⁶⁹ Costs for school supplies are very high and many parents can hardly afford them.⁷⁰

Although the government claims that the publishing capacity can provide schools with all **textbooks** their supply remains unsatisfactory. Despite the efforts of the Turkmen authorities to ban the Russian language from Turkmen schools, many subjects, especially those from the sphere of culture, completely lack teaching materials in Turkmen. Lecturers have therefore no other option but to teach subjects like film making, theatre studies and musicology from the Russian textbooks, which were printed during Soviet times.⁷¹

⁶⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Comprehensive inspections in Ashgabat schools", 15 April 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/04/comprehensive-inspections-in-ashgabat-schools/>

⁶⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "We live like we pay", 12 April 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/04/we-live-like-we-pay/>

⁶⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "All-pervasive arbitrariness", 7 October 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/10/all-pervasive-arbitrariness/>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Shortage of textbooks in schools", 8 October 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/10/shortage-of-textbooks-in-schools/>

⁶⁹ TIHR Report: "Turkmen Education: Reform and Regress", January 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1671390621977742.pdf>

⁷⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "School supplies", 27 August 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=900>

⁷¹ Turkmenistan.ru: "International book fair opens in Ashgabat", 24 September 2010, at http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=17937&type=event&sort=date_desc; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Teaching in Russian banned", 12 September 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/09/teaching-in-russian-banned/>

*In Autumn 2013 students of lower grades could not buy textbooks for a number of subjects. In order to solve the problem, teachers in Ashgabat schools suggested to parents to organise the printing of the books in a publishing house at their own expense.*⁷²

Following a revision of the **school curriculum** for secondary schools in 2013, the *Ruhnama* is not taught anymore. Instead some of Niyazov's books are being taught in literature classes. Since Berdymuhammedov's presidency, the study of *Ruhnama* was gradually reduced in secondary schools and completely abolished from the curricula of universities, although it still remains a part of the entrance examination for universities. Books by and about President Berdymuhammedov have gradually become part of the Turkmen educational system and as of 14 January 2014 they have become mandatory.⁷³

In order to enrol their children in state-run **kindergartens** parents are required to submit not only proof of their Turkmen ancestry going back to the third generation, but also their annual tax declaration. These kindergartens often lack basic furniture and equipment and children are served dull and bad food.⁷⁴

*Although the Turkmen Constitution allows private educational establishments, all private kindergartens were closed upon request of the Ministry of Education without any further explanations in February 2014 in Ashgabat. The private kindergartens were quite expensive some charging up to 210 US\$ per month, but parents were ready to pay the sum, as their children were provided with basic knowledge in a number of subjects such as mathematics, logical thinking, the Turkmen language and nature.*⁷⁵

Following a decision of the Turkmen authorities, **six-year old children** were **enrolled in schools** as of autumn 2013. Syllabi and books were not available, while classes, which are poorly equipped in general, had no adequate chairs and tables for such small children. Teachers for very young children are also not available in Turkmenistan. Qualified teachers were either expelled from schools for different reasons and are now reluctant to come back or they simply refuse to take responsibility for such young children arguing that even seven-year-olds hardly fulfil basic requirements. Teachers who recently graduated who could take care of the children have to pay bribes in order to get a job. This bribe often amounts up to 2000 US\$. The six year olds are not provided with meals, have no supervision after 11:00 a.m. and most of the schools have no space, so that they can take an afternoon nap.⁷⁶

There is a serious **lack of teachers**, especially of those specialised in natural and social science as well as teachers for the Turkmen and for foreign languages, although following the new educational plan,

⁷² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Shortage of textbooks in schools", 8 October 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/10/shortage-of-textbooks-in-schools/>

⁷³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The Rukhnama is gone forever", 1 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/the-rukhnama-is-gone-forever/>; "Writings by Berdymukhammedov are studied in Turkmen schools", 15 January 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/01/writings-by-berdymukhammedov-are-studied-in-turkmen-schools/>

⁷⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "How can I stop stealing?", 1 September 2009, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1146>; "Kindergartens request certificates from the tax office", 11 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1152>

⁷⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "В Ашхабаде закрыли частные образовательные центры для детей", 10 November 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/11/v-ashhabade-zakryili-chastnyie-obrazovatelnyie-tsentryi-dlya-detey/>; "Education centers to be shut down in Turkmenistan", 4 February 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/02/education-centers-to-be-shut-down-in-turkmenistan/>

⁷⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "School or kindergarten", 27 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/school-or-kindergarten/>; "City schools overstaffed", 3 December 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/12/city-schools-overstaffed/>; "Six year old first graders", 9 July 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/07/six-year-old-first-graders/>

these should be studied in depth. Since August 2013 teachers of the Turkmen literature and those previously teaching the *Ruhnama* are now teaching ethics; chemistry teachers are teaching lessons about environmental science and history teachers are giving art lectures⁷⁷. The situation with mathematics teachers is the most critical not only in rural areas, but also in the cities. People who obtained degrees at Turkmen universities since the 1990s have poor teaching skills and poor knowledge of their field of expertise. Many of them even use notes from their more experienced colleagues in order to solve a problem at the blackboard. The reason for this phenomenon is low quality of knowledge at the Turkmen universities as well as rampant corruption, which has serious consequences for the schoolchildren. The passing on of IT-knowledge is a serious problem, as many teachers lack computer literacy and also have difficulties in passing on the skills to their students.⁷⁸

Many teachers can only get a job after paying a bribe, although this does not guarantee that they will keep it. To keep their job, most of them follow state policies and make sure that their students participate in various mass events organised by the Turkmen authorities⁷⁹. In order to highlight the success of the Presidential education reform, the Ministry of Education ordered teachers to assign only A and B grades to their students and that students should not repeat a year. The result was that students are completely lacking motivation⁸⁰.

*In order to ensure a good graduation certificate all you have to do is pay: In Ashgabat five Bs in all five final exams cost 300 US\$, while for the same amount students from Turkmenabad can even ensure five A-grades. In addition to the deeply rooted corruption, this system also shows the limited success of the education reform initiated by the current Turkmen president.*⁸¹

The teachers also have to work on cotton fields during weekends, but they are trying to avoid this by sending their students instead. As a reward, they either promise their students good grades or they simply pay them for the service.⁸²

Since 2000 children of **national minorities**, particularly the Kazakhs and the Uzbeks, have no opportunities to study and receive education in their mother-tongue. Due to requirements to submit a document certifying Turkmen origin, members of minorities also face difficulties in studying at Turkmen universities and can only do so after paying a substantial bribe.⁸³ Although the issue of

⁷⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "School or kindergarten", 27 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/school-or-kindergarten/>

⁷⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Schools lack Maths teachers", 13 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/07/schools-lack-maths-teachers/>; Eurasianet.org: "Will Turkmenistan's Education Reform Work?", 5 March 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66637>; "Turkmenistan Boosts Schooling Requirement", 4 April 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66632>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The Rukhnama is gone forever", 1 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/the-rukhnama-is-gone-forever/>; "Useless gift", 31 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/07/useless-gift/>; "School auctions are over", 5 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/10/school-auctions-are-over/>

⁷⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "City schools overstaffed", 3 December 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/12/city-schools-overstaffed/>

⁸⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Schoolchildren improve academic performance", 24 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1161>

⁸¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen schoolchildren do not feel nervous about the results of final exams", 14 June 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/06/turkmen-schoolchildren-do-not-feel-nervous-about-the-results-of-final-exams/>

⁸² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Manual cotton harvesting campaign launched in Dashoguz velayat", 3 September 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/09/manual-cotton-harvesting-campaign-launched-in-dashoguz-velayat/>; "Familiar autumn sight", 19 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/10/familiar-autumn-sight/>

⁸³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Visit is over, but problems remain", 21 March 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=753>; TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Reclusive Turkmenistan cracks

schools for the Kazakh minority was raised during the meeting between Berdymammedov and the Kazakh president Nursulatan Nazarbayev in 2007, nothing has been done so far about the issue.⁸⁴ Although there is a substantial number of schools for the Turkmen minority in Uzbekistan not a single school for the Uzbek minority exists in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan used to have schools for **the Russian minority**, but many of them have been closed except for the Pushkin school in Ashgabat. The school and 30 classes across Turkmenistan with tuition in Russian are a concession to the Russian Federation, although this does not prevent the Turkmen authorities from using different measures to curtail the presence of the Russian language in the Turkmen education system.⁸⁵ The Ashgabat branch of the Russian State Oil and Gas University, named after the Russian geologist Ivan Mikhaylovich Gubkin, was opened in 2008, but it was closed down four years later.⁸⁶ The Russian classes were also intended for children of families who were to obtain migrant status in the Russian Federation and for members of minorities. As the number of the migrants is decreasing, most of the enrollees are now Uzbek children and Turkmen, whose parents are ready to pay up to 500 US\$ in bribes to the school administration in order to get their children enrolled.⁸⁷ Some parents had even sent official requests to local authorities to increase the number of such classes, but later they were pressured to withdraw their requests.⁸⁸ The main reason for closure of the Russian classes in Turkmenistan is to prevent Turkmen residents from comparing the Turkmen educational system with any other educational systems and realise that the former is deteriorating more and more.⁸⁹

All students, without an exception, are required to obey the strict **dress code**, with girls wearing the Turkmen national dress and boys a white shirt, black trousers and the Turkmen national cap (*takhja*). The Turkmen authorities claim that they did not impose such rules and that such requirements are made by directors of educational establishments. However, the Turkmen authorities did not do anything to prevent the practice. In the meantime wearing the national dress is also required during entrance exams to Turkmen universities.⁹⁰ Future students at Turkmen universities and colleges are also requested to fill out the so-called “Maglumat”, a detailed form indicating one’s **Turkmen ancestry** going back to the third generation, which should ensure that at Turkmen universities only Turkmen students can study. In August 2013 the criteria for Turkmen university and college admission was extended. Enrolees now also had to demonstrate their skills in singing and dancing;

open the door”, 13 July 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1117>; “Turkmen Education: Reform and Regress”, January 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1671390621977742.pdf>

⁸⁴ Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan to build a new gas pipe-line, at http://gzt.uz/rus/ekonomika/kazaxstan_rossiya_i_turkmenistan_postroyat_noviy_gazoprovod.mgr; TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Yzmykshyr will remain without ethnic Kazakhs”, 31 March 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1328>

⁸⁵ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Reclusive Turkmenistan cracks open the door”, 13 July 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1117>

⁸⁶ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Education centers to be shut down in Turkmenistan”, 4 February 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/02/education-centers-to-be-shut-down-in-turkmenistan/>

⁸⁷ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Seeking admission to the Russian class? Present a fridge!”, 10 August 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/08/seeking-admission-to-the-russian-class-present-a-fridge/>;

“School auctions are over”, 5 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/10/school-auctions-are-over/>

⁸⁸ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Number of Russian children not sufficient to form a class”, 1 November 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/?024904448600000000000011000000>; “Number of Russian children not sufficient to form a class”, 1 November 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=906>

⁸⁹ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Education centers to be shut down in Turkmenistan”, 4 February 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/02/education-centers-to-be-shut-down-in-turkmenistan/>

⁹⁰ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “School supplies”, 27 August 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=900>; “National minorities in Turkmenistan: education, culture and social sphere”, March 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1261841206.pdf>; “Entrance exams: video cameras, skullcaps and the Rukhnama”, 12 August 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/08/entrance-exams-video-cameras-skullcaps-and-the-rukhnama/>

their knowledge of patriotic poetry; their sport accomplishments; and good grades in their school certificates.

Wearing the Turkmen national dress is a prerequisite to be admitted to the entrance exams at the Medical University in Ashgabat. The so-called competence test in 2013 envisaged that the applicants visit a morgue at the Niyazov hospital putting on white medical scrubs, caps, medical masks and gloves. Those who passed the test had to show up the next morning at 6 a.m. in front of the Medical University and complete the written part of the exam. The names of those who passed the entrance exam were compiled in advance, after their parents had paid bribes between 75.000 and 150.000 US\$ depending on their subsequent field of expertise.⁹¹

Various **medical certificates** have been requested ahead of matriculation at Turkmen universities since the independence of Turkmenistan, but until recently these could simply be bought with all the required stamps.

Since 2012 university applicants must undergo several tests (TBC, skin and sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse and AIDS), each of them to be paid separately. Medical check-ups are the next requirement and enrolees must be examined by an ophthalmologist, surgeon, general practitioner and psychiatrist. Students who wish to study abroad must hand in each of the results and have them verified by a state notary. Later the documents have to be translated into the required foreign language and the translation fee is often very high. It often happens though that the translation is not accepted by the Russian universities which require that the documents are translated by Turkmenistan's Chamber of Commerce which is located in Ashgabat.⁹²

The number of students admitted to **national and foreign universities** has increased since Berdymuhammedov's presidency⁹³, but their knowledge is generally poor when applying to higher educational establishments. In 2008 over 20.000 enrolees applied for 4000 vacancies and 2.200 of them left the country to study abroad⁹⁴. Five years later the number of vacancies for universities and colleges even tripled⁹⁵, but this is still not sufficient for the number of applicants whose number reached almost 28.000. It should be noted that the latter number only refers to applicants for the Turkmen universities.

Before starting their studies abroad, above all students financially supported by the Turkmen governments, many applicants had to be enrolled to pre-university colleges due to insufficient language proficiency and poor knowledge in general. Most of them are now studying in Russia, the CIS countries and Turkey, but also in Bulgaria, China, Malaysia and Romania⁹⁶. The number of applicants to study at foreign universities has been increasing each year and in 2013 the number increased to some 13.000 and out of that 6514 students studying in Belarus. Many students do not

⁹¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Entrance exams at the Medical University", 21 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/entrance-exams-at-the-medical-university/>

⁹² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Education 2012: how much does it cost to become a prospective student?", 18 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/07/education-2012-how-much-does-it-cost-to-become-a-prospective-student/>

⁹³ TIHR Report, "Turkmenistan. Human rights in the era of the great Renaissance", February 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/5905833640537837.pdf>

⁹⁴ Turkmenistan.ru: "На обучение в зарубежные вузы направляются более 2200 туркменских студентов", 3 July 2008, at http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=13151&type=event&sort=date_desc

⁹⁵ Turkmenistan.ru: "Утверждены квоты на прием учащихся в учебные заведения Туркменистана", 14 July 2013, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/articles/38794.html>

⁹⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Entrance exams: video cameras, skullcaps and the Rukhnama", 12 August 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/08/entrance-exams-video-cameras-skullcaps-and-the-rukhnama/>

intend to return home due to the massive unemployment and lack of job opportunities. Regardless of the lack of qualified doctors, graduates of foreign universities, including Russian medical universities, are denied employment. They must first have their diploma accepted by the Turkmen Ministry of Education and they also have to pay up to 15.000 US\$ for different administrative requirements.⁹⁷

After realizing that such a huge number of students is leaving the country, the Turkmen authorities started putting pressure on them to remain in Turkmenistan.

*In **autumn 2009** the Turkmen authorities introduced new travel rules, which were aimed at preventing some 165 students from being enrolled at the American University in Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek. The Turkmen authorities claimed that their field of specialization was not needed in the country upon their return. Some of the students could not matriculate on time due to the long waiting period in Turkmenistan and were subsequently denied matriculation at the AUCA. The US sponsors then tried to enroll them at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), which finally succeeded after a long back and forth with Turkmen authorities. Over 2.000 students were blacklisted and were deprived of the right to exit the country.⁹⁸*

*Following riots in Osh in **June 2010** the Turkmen authorities found a new reason why the Turkmen students should not continue their studies in Kyrgyzstan. Students were summoned to the local education departments and requested to sign a statement that they do not want to return to Kyrgyzstan. The parents of those who wanted to return had to sign a statement assuming responsibility for letting their children go back to Kyrgyzstan.⁹⁹*

*Turkmen students studying in Turkey were summoned to local offices of the National Security Ministry (NSM) during their summer holidays in **2013** and were interrogated about their viewpoint on protests in Turkey as well as whether they, their acquaintances or other Turkmen citizens participated in the protests. Over 4000 students from Turkmenistan are enrolled in government-sponsored programs at several Turkish universities.¹⁰⁰*

The Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX) was launched in 1993, an **exchange program** supported by the US Department of State and officially tolerated by the Turkmen authorities. Every year some 400 students participated in the selection process and hundreds of them travelled to the United States. During the last few years the number of applicants is declining rapidly and not more than 120 students apply for FLEX per year.

⁹⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Another ban on foreign diplomas, or the side effects of criminal investigation", 27 January 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/01/another-ban-on-foreign-diplomas-or-the-side-effects-of-criminal-investigation/>; "Entrance exams at the Medical University", 21 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/entrance-exams-at-the-medical-university/>

⁹⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Lost the way?", 26 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1162>; "Your travel is restricted!", 20 August 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1137>; "Study-abroad refuseniks expelled from AUCA", 23 November 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1221>; "AUCA students to be transferred to a Bulgarian university", 3 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1147>; "On the 'black lists' for five years. What for?", 14 November 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1211>; "Turkmen students rely on UN", 15 March 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1313>; "Turkmen students may be barred from traveling to Turkish universities", 4 July 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/07/turkmen-students-may-be-barred-from-traveling-to-turkish-universities/>

⁹⁹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): "Some Turkmen Students Allowed to Resume Studies in Kyrgyzstan", 19 August 2010, at http://www.rferl.org/content/Some_Turkmen_Students_Allowed_To_Resume_Studies_In_Kyrgyzstan/213190_3.html

¹⁰⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen students may be barred from traveling to Turkish universities", 4 July 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/07/turkmen-students-may-be-barred-from-traveling-to-turkish-universities/>

In January 2012 the Turkmen authorities organised state sponsored English contests in order to prevent students from participating in the FLEX selection process. Representatives of local educational departments were present during the FLEX testing session and recorded the applicants' names and the names of their schools. The following day school directors approached teachers with a list of names in order to identify these students and obtain all information about these applicants.¹⁰¹

An **English language programme**, supported by the US Embassy, was suddenly and without much explanation closed down.

The program "Hello America!" was suddenly curtailed in June 2012 by the Turkmen authorities without previously informing teachers and students about the decision. The program was run by teachers from the United States and was very popular among students, with the number of applicants continuously rising. On 13 September 2012 the head of the program sent a letter to the students saying that he was sorry to let them know about the closure of the program.¹⁰²

LEISURE

Upon becoming Turkmen President in 2007, Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov announced that **rehearsals ahead of state holidays**, a longstanding practice during the reign of his predecessor Niyazov, will be prohibited¹⁰³. Up to now the rehearsals are common practice and their number has even increased. The rehearsals are regularly held during the academic year as well as during the holidays. Students of all ages are regularly involved in hour-long rehearsals in any weather. This practice resulted in the death of two students in November 2012, ahead of the Neutrality Day celebration, which is held on 12 December. Even the birthday of President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov has turned in a state event and in 2008 it was even a reason to postpone the start of the students' holidays¹⁰⁴.

Ahead of national holidays state-wide rehearsals, marching and crowd scenes are practised for numerous hours following instructions over megaphone involving schoolchildren, students and numerous employees. As a rule, pupils are exempted from attending school, while those from secondary schools, universities and colleges must attend classes and join the rehearsals later on, which often last until late in the evening. Despite of low income in the country, students are regularly requested to buy new outfits at their own expense, although these are used only for one occasion.

Those students who are not perceived to be handsome enough are exempted from rehearsals and thus have to attend school regularly. They are taught by teachers who are also exempted from taking part in these events either because they are pregnant or breastfeeding mothers. Only few parents dare to oppose such a practice, but they are mostly unemployed and must not fear to be fired.¹⁰⁵

*Following an instruction by the Ministry of Education, all students from the 6th-10th grade had to undergo a special selection process in **October 2012**, ahead of the 21st anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence. The selection criteria included their appearance and health*

¹⁰¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "No more FLEX programs", 13 January 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/01/no-more-flex-programs/>

¹⁰² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Goodbye, America!", 19 September 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/09/goodbye-america/>

¹⁰³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "What is to be done? Or what has been done?", 26 January 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/01/what-is-to-be-done-or-what-has-been-done/>

¹⁰⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Stuttering and stumbling as a way to get rest during summer holidays", 15 July 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=898>

¹⁰⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Better not to be born pretty", 30 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/10/better-not-to-be-born-pretty/>

condition, the latter being even more important as students were expected to participate in hour-long rehearsals. Foreseen were more than 70 festivities across Turkmenistan, and schoolchildren, students and employees of state enterprises were often sent from one event to another to ensure a sufficient number of participants in crowd scenes. Major festivities in the Turkmen provinces were recorded in advance and prepared for broadcasting in order to avoid any mistakes on 21 October.¹⁰⁶

*Rehearsals ahead of the Neutrality Day, which is celebrated on 12 December, were suddenly cancelled on **25 November 2012** without much explanation. Although this was never officially announced, the cancellation was ordered due to the death of two students. Both died during the rehearsals in Ashgabat due to pneumonia caused by freezing temperatures. During November schoolchildren, students and state employees had to attend, on a daily basis, lengthy rehearsals and more than a half of all students were not attending the classes. Due to the cold weather, numerous schoolchildren were diagnosed with pneumonia and adults suffered from frostbites after spending many hours in the cold weather. Although many students complained to their teachers about the cold weather, these just did not pay attention and sent them back to the rehearsal.¹⁰⁷*

*Even on **New Year's Eve** schoolchildren, students, teachers and state employees must gather in front of municipal Christmas trees in order to watch the New Year Presidential address aired on huge television screens. The address usually finishes at midnight and only then everybody may go home. Teachers are regularly threatened to have their salaries reduced if they do not take a large number of students with them to listen to the speech.¹⁰⁸*

Visits of President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov to school openings regularly turn into a festive act and young teachers and pupils are lined-up to welcome the President. The selected students do not only have to show good learning results, but also be good looking¹⁰⁹ and show lots of enthusiasm whatever the weather because otherwise the President might express his discontent due to lack of enthusiasm by the onlookers¹¹⁰.

Pupils must also regularly line up along the roads, to greet **foreign representatives** who either attend conferences or come to official state visits. During such visits schoolchildren are lined up along the roads before 06:00 a.m. in order to greet the guests.

The president of the People's Republic of China was scheduled to visit Mary province on 4 September 2013 in order to attend the start-up of the first phase of the gas field Galkynysh. Preparations for the event started already on 10 August and some 80.000 inhabitants of the

¹⁰⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmenistan: festivities and life", 19 October 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/10/turkmenistan-festivities-and-life/>; "Schoolchildren are exempt from attending classes", 27 September 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/09/schoolchildren-are-exempt-from-attending-classes/>; "TV broadcasts about celebrations of Independence Day are ready", 22 October 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/10/tv-broadcasts-about-celebrations-of-independence-day-are-ready/>

¹⁰⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Погибай на репетиции", 2.12.2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/12/pogibay-na-repetitsii/>

¹⁰⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Non-family holiday", 4 January 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/01/non-family-holiday/>; "Turkmen residents to have a rest on a public holiday for the first time", 27 November 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/11/turkmen-residents-to-have-a-rest-on-a-public-holiday-for-the-first-time/>

¹⁰⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The theatre of the absurd lives and prospers", 8 October 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1026>; "Selectees and crowd", 26 May 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1378>

¹¹⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Slaves of the Dashoguz khyakim", 15 February 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1290>; "One hundred thousand welcomers", 26 April 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1350>

Mary province were summoned to join daily preparations and rehearsals ahead of the event. Despite the summer holidays, the local authorities required that even pre-school children, pupils and high-school students attend the rehearsals. Already at 5:00 a.m. on the day of the visit schoolchildren and state employees had to line up along the 55 kilometre long road from the Mary airport to the Galkynysh gas field. More than thousand persons, including children, were ordered to appear at 3:00 a.m. at Mary's airport in order to greet the Turkmen President and the representative from China. Although they remained at the airport until the late afternoon, no food or drinks were available and after the two statesmen left, the residents of Mary had to find their own way home.¹¹¹

Following a presidential decree of January 2010, **physical exercises and sport** have become mandatory for all schoolchildren, students and staff members of ministries and state agencies. The promotion of sport and of a healthy lifestyle in the society is one of the priority aspects of the national policy in order to raise a physically and morally strong generation.¹¹² Even the Day of Health, celebrated on 7 April, has become a public holiday. Regardless of the weather and health conditions of the students and even during their holidays, students must walk up to 30 kilometres along different **"paths of health"** in the name of a healthy life. In 2011 four students were even kicked out of a college after they had left a "path of health" without finishing the compulsory number of kilometres. Although never officially announced, many students broke their limbs during these "paths of health" while older persons lost their consciousness and some even died. In February 2013, due to the poor condition of the "paths of health", the Ministry of Education decided to cancel this activity during the winter.¹¹³ On 17 January 2014 President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov signed a decree according to which the month of April must from now on be spent with different sport activities.¹¹⁴

*In **April 2012** a "week of health and happiness" was held, which included various sport activities. It was enforced at all schools, organisations and state enterprises, which were required to start exercising at 11:00 a.m. - on a daily basis. For the entire week students were required to attend either different rehearsals or join the "paths of health". On 7 April, the main day of the festivities, all teachers and students in Turkmenabat gathered at the city stadium in order to watch the Turkmen President congratulating the Turkmen citizens on the Day of Health.¹¹⁵*

Although the Turkmen media regularly write about the "increasing glory of Turkmen sport in the international sports arena" this has no substance and alleged sports achievements are only observed during various cups in Turkmenistan.¹¹⁶ In addition to stadiums and hippodroms, which were built in every city and bigger villages, even two ice hockey stadiums have recently emerged as a result of the current construction boom in Ashgabat. All the same, the Turkmen population only shows modest interest in sports and the authorities therefore put pressure on them to attend different sport events.

¹¹¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Have Mary residents rejoiced or suffered?", 9 September 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/09/have-mary-residents-rejoiced-or-suffered/>

¹¹² Turkmen.ru: „Be 'faster, higher and stronger!“, 5 September 2010, at <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=7&id=100905a>

¹¹³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Студентов пожалели", 4.02.2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/02/studentov-pozhaleli/>

¹¹⁴ Turkmenistan - The Golden AGE: "Для здоровья населения", 17 January 2014, <http://turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=5711>

¹¹⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Week of health and white scarves", 8 April 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2012/04/week-of-health-and-white-scarves/>

¹¹⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Letter three. On sports", 27 September 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/09/letter-three-on-sports/>

*Every Sunday **horse races take** place in the Turkmen provinces, although not many people are interested in them. This does not stop the Turkmen authorities from forcing children and adults to attend the races. Also Turkmen mass media are summoned to these events and are required to produce extensive coverage of each event. Every school director is required to send at least 80 to 100 schoolchildren, primarily boys, to join the races, following an instruction by the local authorities.¹¹⁷*

The Turkmen authorities spend hundreds of millions of dollars for different buildings intended for sport activities, but an overwhelming number of them are inoperative. Many officials in the Turkmen provinces even prefer to keep them locked out of fear that children might damage something. Also many **professional trainers** can only work for a few hours with children, as they must attend different mass-events ahead of and during the numerous national holidays. Funds for sport equipment and furniture are either not available or retained by civil servants who organise these mass-events, which is why parents are required to buy balls and strips.

In a volleyball school in Ashgabat almost all the trainers were ordered to attend the rehearsals ahead of the Neutrality Day and could not work with children during November and December 2012. Only the school director and one trainer, who has not yet finished his diploma, remained in the school.¹¹⁸

After the Turkmen President got enthusiastic about **cycling**, he urged his officials to organise a wide-scale cycling event on 1 September 2013 and soon after more than 30.000 people across Turkmenistan were ordered to participate in the event. Following the order more than 35.000 bicycles were imported from China and Turkey.

Everybody, including children, was required to buy a bicycle and sportswear. The average cost for the required equipment was up to 240 US\$ per person. Some ministries and state agencies allocated funds for the purchase from their budgets, but the majority of them either required cash from their staff or simply deducted the costs from their salaries. The event was scheduled for 7:00 a.m. in the morning, but participants and audience had to turn up at the venue a couple of hours before the start. Three race routes for the purpose were built in Ashgabat alone, with the longest one stretching 25 kilometres. In Dashoguz children had to show up at the race track at 6:00 a.m., while those from Ashgabat had to line up along the Archibil Avenue before dawn.¹¹⁹

Most **books** in Turkmenistan date back to the 50s-80s of the last century and are already falling apart. Hundreds of libraries have been liquidated since Turkmenistan's independence and the books from these libraries were plundered, destroyed or even burnt in traditional Turkmen ovens for baking bread¹²⁰. Foreign and Russian classics can nowadays be acquired more easily on bazaars than in public and school libraries, as these are predominately provided with books written by the

¹¹⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Forced gatherings in hippodrome", 30 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2011/10/forced-gatherings-in-hippodrome/>

¹¹⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Легче строить стадионы, чем развивать спорт", 30.1.2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/01/legche-stroit-stadionyi-chem-razvivat-sport/>

¹¹⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Cycling boom in Turkmenistan", 13 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/cycling-boom-in-turkmenistan/>; "Ready for the start", 21 August 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/08/ready-for-the-start/>; "The country on bicycles", 2 September 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2013/09/the-country-on-bicycles/>

¹²⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "A non-reading nation", 28 February 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1053>

incumbent and the former President¹²¹. In each Turkmen city there are not more than three bookstores, while none of them exist in small towns, urban settlements and villages¹²².

In February 2008, **opera, cinema and circus** were revived in the country following an order by the Turkmen President. Cinema was forbidden in 2000 by the late President Saparmurat Niyazov and all the equipment was plundered. While all the movie theatres were destroyed and closed down or leased to different organizations, which had nothing to do with cinematography, the profession of a movie technician, once very popular, does not exist any longer.¹²³ "The Boarder", the first Turkmen movie since the collapse of the Soviet Union, was made in 2013 and was shown to a wide Turkmen audience – following an order by the current Turkmen President.

*Circus which was banned during Niyazov's time became a highlight in spring 2010. Excitement about the circus coming to town was so great that many people waited for a whole night in order to buy a ticket. The opening of the circus on 23 April 2010 in Ashgabat was available only for a selected number of children. They had to show up at 5:00 a.m. and were not allowed to take any food and drinks with them. The children were also requested to shout slogans honouring the President upon his arrival at the circus. Following the President's opening speech and his show riding on an Akhal-teke horse, teachers received an order by the school administration to ensure that the applause of the children following the President's performance will be enthusiastic and loud because otherwise they will be reprimanded.*¹²⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Rights of the Child should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Take measures to improve the quality of education in elementary and secondary schools and systematically review school curricula in the Turkmen educational institutions. The Turkmen authorities should also ensure that the textbooks are in line with international standards and that they are accessible to all students;
- Take steps to improve material conditions in schools and ensure that all children are provided with the necessary school supplies;
- Ensure that the Turkmen children regularly attend classes and are not prevented from doing so by the mandatory attendance at different rehearsals ahead of national holidays;
- Take measures to prevent compulsory wearing of national Turkmen dress for students;
- Reopen Russian-classes as well as schools for children of all national minorities in Turkmenistan;
- Improve training of teachers, increase their remuneration and ensure that teachers can completely devote their time to teaching students;
- Undertake measures to stop the wide-spread corruption at all levels of the Turkmen educational system;
- Increase availability of university education and colleges for young people in Turkmenistan;
- Make sure that students wishing to study abroad can do so without facing different obstacles imposed by the State party;
- Ensure that students can fully enjoy their holidays and time for leisure without being required to attend different rehearsals ahead of national holidays and state visits.

¹²¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "In search of books", 16 January 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=909>; "Writings by Berdymukhammedov are studied in Turkmen schools", 15 January 2014, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/2014/01/writings-by-berdymukhammedov-are-studied-in-turkmen-schools/>

¹²² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "No interest in reading", 6 July 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1107>

¹²³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "How about going to the cinema?", 1 April 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=520>

¹²⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen circus", 10 May 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1363>

TIHR RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil rights and freedoms (arts. 13 and 17 of the Convention)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Abolish excessive control of the work of media and refrain from using state media as tools of ideological propaganda;
- Protect children's right to seek and receive information from outside Turkmenistan by putting an end to measures that restrict the use of satellite channels and access to foreign media;
- Refrain from systematic filtering, censoring or blocking of online content, and do not restrict access to such content simply because it contains information that the Turkmen authorities do not like or agree with. Ensure that any measures to limit access to online content deemed illegal is strictly limited to that specific content, is absolutely necessary and is sanctioned through an impartial court decision subject to appeal;
- Ensure that internet users are allowed to freely use social networking sites and online forums of their choice for discussion and that their interactions on such sites are not monitored or restricted in violation of international human rights law;
- Put an end to the campaign to dismantle private satellite antennas, which violates international standards protecting the right to receive information regardless of frontiers as well as the right to privacy.

Basic health and welfare (arts. 18, para 3; 24, paras 1 and 2 b-e; 26; 27, paras. 1-3 of the Convention)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Improve the overall state of public health care and sanitary conditions; increase the number of medical institutions and provide them with further equipment; ensure systematic education and increase the number of medical professionals in Turkmenistan;
- Ensure that medical staff informs patients about their right to free medication and provide pharmacies, especially those in rural areas, with a sufficient supply of medication. The Turkmen authorities should also undertake measures to combat corruption and the black market for medication, which enables minors to an easy access to prescription medication;
- Increase efforts in providing the Turkmen population, especially the Turkmen youth, with comprehensive information about the spread of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases. The Turkmen authorities should also make sure that there is adequate treatment for such diseases and that the affected youth can obtain adequate medical treatment without fear of being discriminated and without fear of consequences after turning to medical institutions for help;
- Take measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases by undertaking concrete steps and not by following a practice of covering up and denying their existence;
- Take measures to stop suicides among young people by creating crisis centres; by conducting public campaigns and by training school staff, especially school psychologists, to provide the young people with support in order to overcome crisis situations;
- Take measures to reduce the widespread unemployment and support the unemployed youth by providing them with sufficient alternatives upon finishing their education;
- Ensure that the Turkmen population, especially those in rural areas, has adequate access to potable water and take measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases due a lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

Education, leisure and cultural activities (arts. 28, para 1 c and e, and para 3; 29; 31 of the Convention)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- Take measures to improve the quality of education in elementary and secondary schools and systematically review school curricula in the Turkmen educational institutions. The Turkmen authorities should also ensure that the textbooks are in line with international standards and that they are accessible to all students;
- Take steps to improve material conditions in schools and ensure that all children are provided with the necessary school supplies;
- Ensure that the Turkmen children regularly attend classes and are not prevented from doing so by the mandatory attendance at different rehearsals ahead of national holidays;
- Take measures to prevent compulsory wearing of national Turkmen dress for students;
- Reopen Russian-classes as well as schools for children of all national minorities in Turkmenistan;
- Improve training of teachers, increase their remuneration and ensure that teachers can completely devote their time to teaching students;
- Undertake measures to stop the wide-spread corruption at all levels of the Turkmen educational system;
- Increase availability of university education and colleges for young people in Turkmenistan;
- Make sure that students wishing to study abroad can do so without facing different obstacles imposed by the State party;
- Ensure that students can fully enjoy their holidays and time for leisure without being required to attend different rehearsals ahead of national holidays and state visits.