

Turkmenistan: Journalist Prevented from Travelling Abroad

Soltan Achilova Planned to Travel to Geneva for Rights Award Ceremony, Meetings

(Vienna, November 21, 2023) The Turkmenistani authorities' actions to prevent an independent journalist, Soltan Achilova, from travelling to Geneva for a human rights award ceremony are shameful and clearly aimed at preventing her from shedding light on the repressive human rights situation in the country, a group of 10 human rights organizations said today. The Turkmenistani authorities should reverse their stance, allow Achilova to freely travel abroad, and stop harassing her because of her journalistic work.

The groups are: Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR, Austria), International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR, Belgium), Human Rights Watch, Democratic Civil Union of Turkmenistan (Netherlands), Institute for Peace and Democracy (Netherlands), Turkmen.News (Netherlands), Freedom Files (Poland), Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Bulgaria), Cotton Campaign/Global Labour Justice-International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF) and Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

"There is no doubt that Soltan Achilova was prevented from leaving the country due to an order 'from above,' which shows how keen the Turkmenistani authorities are to suppress any criticism of their policies," said Farid Tuhbatullin, chair of TIHR. "Barring her from travelling, however, will only draw more attention to and criticism of Turkmenistan's terrible free speech record."

Achilova, 74, was due to leave for Geneva with her daughter, Maya Achilova, on November 17. Her planned program in Geneva included a belated ceremony related to the prestigious Martin Ennals Award, for which she was [selected as a finalist](#) in 2021. That year the award ceremony was [held online](#) due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Achilova was also scheduled to hold [a master class](#) during the Human Rights Week organized by the University of Geneva and meet with representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, human rights defenders, and students.

Border officials at the airport in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital, after deliberately damaging Achilova's and her daughter's passports, [refused to allow](#) them through passport control, in what was clearly a predetermined decision to deny them the right to leave the country, given that all their documents were in order. Customs and border officials also treated the journalist in a humiliating manner.

The authorities of Turkmenistan, one of the most isolated countries in the world, strictly control the flow of information in the country and relentlessly [persecute](#) dissenters. The country's few independent journalists work under the radar, at serious risk to themselves and their families.

Achilova [told](#) TIHR, with which she cooperates, that on November 17, airport officials singled her and her daughter out for lengthy and intrusive security checks. After scanning the two women and their luggage electronically several times, customs officials also manually inspected their belongings and conducted body searches, during which Achilova was stripped twice - a degrading and humiliating experience for her.

Achilova told TIHR that at passport control, she watched as border officials wiped the pages of the women's passports using wet napkins – without explaining the reason - and then told them that their passports were not valid for travel. When the journalist and her daughter handed over their documents at passport control, the passports were undamaged. No one remarked on any fault with their passports when they checked in for their flight. The German embassy in Ashgabat issued visas in their passports only a few days prior to their planned trip.

Border officials rejected Achilova's request to summon higher-level managers, claiming that they were all busy because of upcoming festivities in the capital. The journalist and her daughter do not yet know if their passports will be considered permanently invalid due to the border officials' actions.

Achilova has repeatedly been subjected to intimidation and harassment because of her investigative reporting, including surveillance, internet restrictions, [psychological pressure](#), and [physical attacks](#), with impunity for the attackers. She has also previously been [barred from leaving](#) the country on several occasions.

The new travel ban against Achilova is particularly reprehensible as it comes shortly after the Turkmenistani government pledged to respect freedom of expression and ensure an enabling environment for journalists during the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) of the country's human rights record, the groups said. The UPR was held in Geneva on November 6 under the auspices of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

"The Turkmenistani government should deliver on the commitments it recently made in Geneva and stop obstructing Soltan Achilova's work and her travel abroad," said Brigitte Dufour, director of IPHR. "Turkmenistan's international partners should speak out against the move to prevent the journalist from going to Geneva and make it clear that the government's UPR pledges are not meaningful without concrete follow-up in cases such as this one."

Achilova has reported on the situation in Turkmenistan for more than a decade. Through her photos and stories, she has covered issues such as food insecurity, forced and illegal evictions, lack of adequate health care, and discrimination against people with disabilities.

Achilova has also worked with other foreign-based media outlets and organizations, including the Turkmen service of the US government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

The Martin Ennals Award is an [annual prize](#) for human rights defenders at risk, with finalists and laureates being selected by a jury made up of leading international human rights groups.

"Thanks to her journalism, Soltan Achilova has provided first-hand insights into the lives of ordinary people in Turkmenistan as well as ongoing problems of injustice and human rights violations," said Rachel Denber, deputy Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Instead of attempting to shut her up, the authorities should welcome her work and use her findings to initiate concrete measures to improve people's lives".