

10-13 September 2008: Events in Ashgabat

One and half months after the events, information about the armed clashes which took place in September 2008 in Ashgabat is still contradictory and incomplete. This can be explained by the closed nature of Turkmen society. The official statements are limited to reports on the operation conducted to detain a group of drug smugglers on 13 September which was successfully «neutralized»¹, and to casualties among the law enforcers (no further details are provided)². Despite the fact that foreign mass media and websites run by Turkmen exiles reported on certain details of the incident, many of these reports were based on rumors which later were either left unconfirmed or needed to be looked into. Various versions of the reasons behind the events, voiced by analysts «while the trial is still hot», currently look like speculative assumptions.

The review below is based on information received from the sources of Memorial Human Rights Center inside Turkmenistan. Some of the data was obtained from discussions with the representatives of the power structures («siloviki») who participated in the September events. Apparently, the oral stories of the law enforcers who were unofficially questioned several weeks after the events may contain inaccuracies. In addition, some of their statements are likely to be based on governmental reports which, on various grounds, may include not fully reliable information.

On the other hand, even though some questions remain unanswered, the information collected makes it possible to analyze the events once again, to clarify some important details and to discard the versions which are clearly corrupt.

Islamists, clans, drug smugglers, opposition leaders, CIA?

On 13 September 2008, following the first reports of an incident in Ashgabat, the mass media voiced the assumption on the alleged involvement of a «radical Islamic group»³. During the following days, this version was repeated in various mass media⁴. The BBC report mentioned

¹ «Criminal gang apprehended in Ashgabat», www.turkmenistan.ru, 14.09.2008. The article refers to the press service of Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry that means that the information is, above all, targeted at an international audience. A week later, the authorities again reported on «neutralizing of a criminal group of drug dealers». «In the course of the operation to detain the criminals, a large amount of narcotics and firearms as well as a large sum of cash in Turkmen manats and US dollars and also numerous gold items were seized» («Group of drug dealers rooted out in Turkmenistan», www.turkmenistan.ru, 21.09.2008).

² At the 15 September 2008 sitting of the State Security Council of Turkmenistan, President Berdymukhamedov mentioned the «losses amongst the special forces» and the «mistakes» made during the course of the operation to liquidate a «large group of criminals» («Sitting of the State Security Council of Turkmenistan», *Neutral Turkmenistan* official daily newspaper, 16.09.2008).

³ «Law enforcers suffered losses during unrests in the area of *Khitrovka*», www.gundogar.org, 13.09.2008. The information is published with a reference to an «anonymous source from the diplomatic corpus in Turkmenistan».

⁴ To back up the account about the «Wahhabite's rebellion», «Deutsche Welle» published a detailed article written by its Afghan correspondent on the links of the leader of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan Takhir Yuldashev with the «Turkmen brothers» (A. Durani «Ashgabat's «shooters» were armed by Takhir Yuldashev?», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008). Selbi Atayeva, a journalist, presented the position of Turkmen law enforcers arguing that the «Wahhabites», based in the mosque in *Khitrovka* (a district of Ashgabat) who had old scores to settle with the authorities, intervened in the «criminal infighting». Profiting from «drug trafficking», they allegedly set up a «powerful and dangerous organization» which was supported by the youth and had «its patrons» in the military, police and MNS (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008). Igor Ivakhnenko, the author of the publication on www.rusenergy.com even argued that the «extremists» demanded that the authorities proclaim Turkmenistan an Islamic state instead of adopting a new

«Wahhabite's theory» as the «most frequently cited» alternative to the official version of «rebellious drug dealers»⁵.

Almost immediately, several experts (Arkady Dubnov, Vitaly Volkov) and the opposition journalist Batyr Mukhamedov argued that infighting between different groups inside the government and power structures that monopolize the drug business⁶ could be the «real reasons» behind the armed collision.

According to Akmukhammed Velpasar, the writer and political emigrant currently residing in Sweden, the fact that some «Ajdar» (see below), who had earlier been convicted of organising an anti-government demonstration in 1995, testifies to the «initiating of a coup against the Berdymukhamedov's regime. The authorities simply caught them before they struck»⁷.

The publication of the dissident website «Turkmenskaya Iskra» based in Moscow reported on the averted attempt of the coup prepared by a «group of radical opposition leaders», which presumably included former high ranking governmental members convicted in 2003-2007. It was further argued that the rumors about «drug traders», «Wahhabites» and hostages taking were intentionally disseminated by the special services to discredit the revolted opposition leaders⁸.

Alexandr Shustov, an expert at the Fund of Strategic Culture, tried to summarize the above versions and stated the following: «It cannot be excluded that Islamic armed formations may be used by high former ranking officials who oppose the current regime in Turkmenistan. Many of them used to maintain close ties with Talibans in the Niyazov's era. In this light, the «drug» version provided in the official reports of the Turkmen authorities is also plausible»⁹.

Another expert at the Fund of Strategic Culture, Ajdar Kurtov, heavily criticized these versions and gave his alternative account: «It is the U.S. special services who are behind the events in Ashgabat». In their struggle for energy resources in Central Asia, they will «push anyone to an armed fight»¹⁰.

As our sources in Ashgabat report, none of these hypotheses received much confirmation in the course of the official investigation.

The version, currently given by the Ministry of National Security of Turkmenistan, is based on the assumption that the two killed «rebels» had ties with a new network of heavy drug smugglers from Iran and Afghanistan headed by nationals of Iran. A part of these drugs was sold inside Turkmenistan while the rest was exported to Kazakhstan. According to some information, between March and August 2008, six armed drug mules were killed whilst being detained. Two citizens of Iran and about 20 Turkmenistani citizens including women who went to the border districts of Iran were arrested. According to the source, due to the investigation into this case, border trade has dropped considerably and customs control has been stepped up.

Despite the statements in official documents on the disclosed drug network's ties with international «Islamic militants» and on possible military and ideological training being carried out in the north-west of Afghanistan by some of them (supported by Iranians), this is not confirmed by clear evidence. As a MNS officer confessed, «the disclosed group was not

Constitution at the 26 September 2008 sitting of Khalk Maslakhty (I. Ivakhnenko «Riot in Ashgabat», www.rusenergy.com, 15.09.2008).

⁵ Yu. Savchenko «Who was the target of the assault in Ashgabat?», www.news.bbc.co.uk, 15.09.2008.

⁶ A. Dubnov «Special Operation on Rukhnama's Day», *Vremya novostei* newspaper (www.vremya.ru), 15.09.2008; V. Panfilova «A group of drug dealers liquidated in Ashgabat», *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (www.ng.ru), 15.09.2008; E. Petukhova «Drug dealers divide Ashgabat», *Moskovskiy komsomolets* newspaper (www.mk.ru), 17.09.2008; R. Safronov «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008.

⁷ R. Safronov «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008.

⁸ M. Pender «A new attempt to restore constitutional order failed in Ashgabat», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008.

⁹ A. Shustov «Turkmenia: fights of regional importance», www.fondsk.ru, 17.09.2008.

¹⁰ A. Kurtov «U.S. special services may stand behind Ashgabat's events», www.fondsk.ru, 17.09.2008. Kurtov draws an analogy with the 2005 Andijan events and argues that the investigation of the latter allegedly «revealed evidence on the involvement of the U.S. Embassy based in Uzbekistan in the organization of the Islamic riot».

involved in promoting extremist ideas inside Turkmenistan». Also, the assumptions regarding the ties of the group's leaders with Iranian intelligence services are being currently checked.

A total of 30 persons, none of whom directly participated in the «Ashgabat incident» were detained. In some Turkmen localities, both prior and after the events of 10-13 September 2008, weapons, drugs and currency which allegedly belonged to this group, were confiscated.

According to the information received during the investigation, torture is widely used; yet, many detainees refuse to give testimonies. One of those arrested died due to the use of psychoactive drugs (according to another version, he committed suicide). Some women who had been earlier charged with drug trafficking, are currently being taken from the Dashoguz colony to Ashgabat for identification and other investigatory actions.

As law enforcers admit, they «encounter difficulties» with evidence gathering.

Ajdar and Akhmed

Two residents of the capital, Khudaiberdy Amandurdyev (known as Ajdar), born in 1973, and Akhmed Khodjagulyev, born in 1980, are held responsible by the authorities for the gun battle.¹¹ Both were killed during the September incident.

According to the law enforcers, Amandurdyev was a leader of the local criminal group and a police character since the time of the anti-Armenian massacre in May 1989. In 1995, he was charged with «hooliganism» and sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment for the organization of an anti-government demonstration in the capital of Turkmenistan¹². People's attitudes toward him differed; some residents of the Ashgabat district *Khitrovka* even viewed him as a sort of local «Robin Hood».

In her publication, the journalist Selbi Atayeva termed Amandurdyev a 26 y.o. «godfather» with «Wahhabite's» beard who was recently released from prison, «ascribed by rumors as a fighter during the military actions in Chechnya on the side of separatists»¹³. None of these statements is correct.

Khodjagulyev, a former junior officer in Turkmenistan's border troops, was a friend of «Ajdar». He had a beard which, amongst other things, made journalists assume that the organizers of the events had ties with «Wahhabites».

It should be noted that, according to unofficial data, both «rebels» were not very religious¹⁴.

According to the version of the investigation, special services disclosed Amandurdyev and Khodjagulyev during the work on the group of drug smugglers which operated in the Akhal velayat¹⁵. Allegedly, using his knowledge of the situation at the border, Khodjagulyev helped to arrange the drug trafficking from Iran, and both suspects took part in the organization of a network of small-scale dealers, as well as the system of distribution, transportation and communications. According to the same source, both often visited Iran and Afghanistan.

In about May 2008, a state fuel station in Geok-tepe was set on fire. Its director was an alleged network dealer who «owed» some money for drugs. About 15 mln mantas (under \$1000) were stolen from the fuel station. Due to this incident, two months later, Amandurdyev and Khodjagulyev were officially placed on the wanted list¹⁶.

¹¹ Data on «Ajdar»'s birthrate is confirmed by a copy of the 1995 verdict found in the archives of Memorial Human Rights Center. Rashid Gullyev, a journalist, refers to unofficial information which indicates 1983 as the birth year of Khodjagulyev (R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008). However, our sources mark 1980 as Khodjagulyev's birth year. The same year is mentioned in an anonymous Internet-publication («Breaking news first hand», turkmeny.blogspot.com, 16.09.2008).

¹² He was a member of the so-called «Ashgabat's Group Of 8» whom Amnesty International and other human rights groups tried to free during the late 1990s.

¹³ S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008.

¹⁴ R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008.

¹⁵ According to the unconfirmed data, Amandurdyev and Khodjagulyev were put under surveillance for about a year (R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008).

¹⁶ Some publications argue that the burnt down fuel station was located in Byuzmein (R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008). This is not confirmed by our sources. The statement of Victoria Panfilova on

The opposition sources offer a different interpretation of the events.

Nurberdy Nurmamedov, a Turkmen dissident residing in Ashgabat, told Radio Liberty in an interview that «Ajdar» went into hiding in early September 2008 after the police had visited his house when Ramadan began and had taken away the mullah during the traditional evening feast». Shortly after, as Nurmamedov argues, it was announced that there was a search for «Ajdar» due to a series of explosions which occurred in Ashgabat and its suburbs: «in Geok-tepe, at gas stations and the Turkish shopping center «Yimpash» in Ashgabat». His portraits were posted all around Ashgabat although «the people who knew him said that «Ajdar» was not behind these explosions»¹⁷. Later, in a telephone conversation with the author, Nurmamedov specified that setting alight the fuel station in Geok-tepe and putting «Ajdar» on the wanted list took place not in early September but, most likely, a month before, while the reports on the explosion in the shopping center «Yimpash» remained unconfirmed. According to Nurmamedov, during the evening of 1 September 2008 – the day when Ramadan began – «Ajdar» was at home welcoming guests and he had a conflict with a policeman who had come to his house (no further details are available).¹⁸

The statement of «Watan», the opposition movement in exile, says that after Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, a political emigrant and the organizer of the demonstration in 1995 secretly came to Ashgabat from Norway in June 2008 and was arrested in his father's home in the suburb of the capital, police started persecuting former participants of the 1995 demonstration. Some of those who had been earlier charged with taking part in this demonstration and lived in Ashgabat and Akhal velayat, «had to go into hiding». «The repeated attempts of these individuals to make the power structures understand that they are no longer participating in political activities and their requests to leave their families in peace came to nothing. On the contrary, the persecutions intensified. During this opposition, armed skirmishes repeatedly occurred which resulted in the deaths of several power officers»¹⁹.

Other sources also back up the fact that in summer 2008 police control over the Turkmen residents who had previously taken part in public protest actions was stepped up²⁰. However, apart from the burning down of the fuel station in Geok-tepe which was the result of criminal infighting, and shootouts in the border area, our correspondents do not confirm the facts of the death of policemen or explosions in Ashgabat and nearby suburbs in the time period up to 10 September 2008, as quoted by both opposition sources and some mass media²¹.

Looking for Amandurdyev, in early September the police detained some of his relatives (at least three). The practice of using suspect's relatives as hostages is quite common for Turkmenistan. In the evening of 7 or 8 September, Amandurdyev's wife was arrested. She was taken to the city police department in the Myati Kesaev Street where she was severely beaten during the interrogation and was not allowed to sleep. She did not report the information required by the police. Two days later she was freed; supposedly, with the purpose of using her as bait. Her cell phone was bugged. An ambush was made at Amandurdyev's house.

the fuel station on the entry road into Ashgabat on 12 September 2008 being set on fire is also untrue (V. Panfilova «Group of drug dealers liquidated in Ashgabat», «Nezavisimaya gazeta» (www.ng.ru), 15.09.2008).

¹⁷ Panner B. «Turkmen Opposition Leader Offers Different Version Of Ashgabat Shoot-Out», www.rferl.org, 25.09.2008.

¹⁸ Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008.

¹⁹ «On the tragic events of 12-13 September in Ashgabat». Statement made by the Watan Social Political Movement, www.watan.ru, 22.09.2008.

²⁰ These moves affected not only participants of the 1995 demonstration. For instance, in summer 2008, MNS officers visited all *yashuli* (elders) who in 2001 went to the Minister of Environment protesting against waste discharge from the Turkish textile plant near Ashgabat into the irrigation ditches. Also, the women who protested against the demolition of residential houses due to the reconstruction of the road in Keshi (suburb of Ashgabat) in 2003 were summoned by MNS.

²¹ There is no data on the killing of the «bandit» by his «partner in crime» in the mosque in *Khitrovka* in the early days of September, reported by Selbi Atayeva (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008).

«Ajdar» was aware about the arrests of his relatives and the release of his wife. On 10 September 2008, he reached her on her phone and heard about the torture she had gone through²². Allegedly, he lost self control and thought only about revenge. According to some information, he asked his wife to pass the phone to a policeman who was in his house; another version goes that he asked for the number of the investigator from his wife and called him directly. He said the following: «You were looking for me, so let us meet and make it clear like men». The unfinished drinking water bottling plant Cheshme in the northern outskirts of Ashgabat became the venue of the meeting²³.

«Special operation» on 10-13 September 2008

On the way to the plant, Amandurdyev and Khodjagulyev met a police patrol. «Ajdar» introduced himself as a member of a patrol and requested the officers to inform their supervisors that he was going to the plant to «crack down on cops»²⁴.

The next patrol which consisted of a police sergeant and two conscripts from the Ministry of Defense tried to detain the «avengers» near the mosque in the Griboedov Street; yet, the latter opened gunfire and killed two patrolmen (one of the soldiers was injured but survived)²⁵.

When they arrived at the plant, Amandurdyev and Khodjagulyev shot several times in the air and brought the workers, who were working in the yard and the adjoining building that was

²² Nurmamedov told Radio Liberty that «Ajdar» had called his mother at the moment when the police was in her house (not his wife). Nurmamedov makes a mistake saying that this conversation had taken place on 12 September 2008. (Panner B. «Turkmen Opposition Leader Offers Different Version Of Ashgabat Shot-Out», www.rferl.org, 25.09.2008). Later, in the phone conversation with the author, Nurmamedov specified that Amandurdyev talked to the wife of his elder brother, and added that «Ajdar»'s mother had passed away long before the September events (Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008).

²³ The fact that detention and torture of «Ajdar»'s relatives pushed the following events is supported by reports of oppositional sources («Watan»'s statement of 22.09.2008, interview of Nurberdy Nurmamedov to Radio Liberty), and some journalists. The most accurate description is provided in the article of Sokhra Altyeva (S. Altyeva «Were shooting...», on-line journal «Oasis», №19, October 2008 www.ca-oasis.info). The journalist Selbi Atayeva made a reference to anonymous sources in the Turkmen special services and offered alternative accounts contradicting each other. In the first publication, she mentions taking Ajdar's wife hostage in early September, but she relates this not to the policemen's actions but to the gangsters' infighting due to money. As far as the resulting events are concerned, these are allegedly the revenge of «Wahhabites» against the authorities for the confiscated drugs (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008). In an article published a week later, Atayeva argues that the reason behind the incident was the actions of the police patrol that cut off «Ajdar»'s «Wahhabite»'s beard (according to our information, he never had one). Later, the authorities detained Ajdar's and Akhmed's families and their «gang» was blocked in several houses in *Khitrovka*. However, when they learnt on the phone about the torture of their relatives, the «gangsters» broke away from the besieged house through an underground tunnel and «rushed asunder», while «Ajdar» went to the plant where the weapons had been hidden (S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008). Both versions listed by Atayeva, according to our sources, are incorrect. Nurberdy Nurmamedov told the author that allegedly the police patrol had earlier cut off Khodjagulyev's beard, and not «Ajdar»'s (Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008). Even if this incident did take place, by all accounts it cannot be considered a reason for the events that followed.

²⁴ Some publications also refer to this episode. According to Selbi Atayeva, «Ajdar» «stopped at military posts, named himself and asked the officers to pass this information on to the authorities» (S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008). Igor Ivakhnenko reports that «armed people started arriving in vehicles to police boxes demanding to talk to the head of the Interior Ministry and intimidating patrol and duty servicemen» (I. Ivakhnenko «Riot in Ashgabat», www.rusenergy.com, 15.09.2008). In a phone conversation, Nurberdy Nurmamedov told the author about «Ajdar»'s appeal to the patrol men: «He named himself, said that his photos had been placed on posters by the police and that he was going to the plant. He fired a couple of shots into the air with a pistol» (Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008).

²⁵ A firing squad is mentioned by several authors. Rashid Gullyev writes about the death of two patrol men, one of them a conscript (R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008). Selbi Atayeva reports on the killing of «3 soldiers of the paramilitary forces» near the mosque in the Griboedov Street on 10 September 2008, 2 other military men near the station, and a firing squad of an officer and a soldier by the deserters (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008). It may be assumed that in reality this relates the same event but described by the correspondents differently. Ivakhnenko mentions a firing squad of a police post where a policeman was killed (I. Ivakhnenko «Riot in Ashgabat», www.rusenergy.com, 15.09.2008).

under construction, outside of the premises²⁶. The information provided in the mass media that some of the workers were taken hostage and injured in the course of the gun fight which followed is incorrect²⁷.

As soon as a vehicle with an investigator and 2-3 policemen arrived at the plant, Amandurdyev and Khodjaguliev went up to it, made sure that the person who was responsible for the torture of his wife was in the car, and almost immediately opened fire (only one of the policemen survived). As our local sources report, it was Amandurdyev who started shooting first²⁸.

Turkmen opposition leaders offer different versions of how the incident started.

According to one of them, «representatives of the special services approached the rebels under the cover of Amandurdyev's relatives and a member of the group, surrounded them and, instead of talking, opened fire»²⁹. This story contradicts several reports that no actions were taken by the security forces on 10 September and that they initially attempted to «detain the criminals alive».

As Nurberdy Nurmamedov told Radio Liberty, a police officer covered by the son of «Ajdar», who was taken to the site as a human shield, demanded that Amandurdyev give in but during these talks he was killed by a sharpshooter of the «rebels» who was hiding in the plant. In the gun fight that followed, «Ajdar»'s son was also killed³⁰. Later, in a phone conversation with the author, Nurmamedov admitted that the information on the death of «Ajdar»'s underage son was not confirmed³¹.

Having blocked the exits on the ground floor of the unfinished manufacturing building, Amandurdyev and Khodjaguliev took fighting positions on the first floor and repelled the policemen by shooting at them with submachine guns. As the premises were built of reinforced concrete blocks and slabs, it had many separate rooms isolated from each other. The territory of the plant was surrounded by a concrete fence. According to the official report, weapons were hidden here in advance (at least 6 Kalashnikovs, RGD-5 and F-1 grenades and ammunition). The information on the grenade launchers and sniper's weapons³² used by the assailants was not

²⁶ «Prior to the time appointed for the meeting with investigators, the wanted person and his partner expelled all workers from the territory of the plant and blocked all entries and exits» (S. Altyeva «Were shooting...», on-line journal «Oasis», №19, October 2008 www.ca-oasis.info). According to the Atayeva's account, «by that time no person was left at the plant as the administration «sent the workers home» during the shootout with the patrol (S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008).

²⁷ Ivakhnenko reports «about 50 hostages» (I. Ivakhnenko «Riot in Ashgabat», www.rusenergy.com, 15.09.2008). Atayeva mentions rumors of 15 persons taken hostage at the plant which is «most likely... ungrounded» (S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008). The hostages from among the plant's workers and victims during the gun battle are further mentioned in the reports of the Austrian-based human rights group «Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights» (www.chrono-tm.org) on 13-14 September 2008. Iranian news agency IRNA reported on hostages, according to some information, from among the plant's workers, and from the other – from among schoolchildren («Gunmen take hostage in Turkmenistan», www2.irna.ir, 14.09.2008). It is true that at that time in Ashgabat there were rumours that the school had been seized by the fighters. According to a local journalist, in one of the schools the classes were canceled and «the teachers forced all children into the classrooms and announced that neighboring school №33 had been seized and they should sit still». Along with that, there were rumors about the seizure of a hospital by the fighters in the 11th microrayon (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008).

²⁸ Altyeva provides a similar description: «As soon as the UAZ and investigators arrived, their car was shot at immediately. It was a revenge for the torture of his wife» (S. Altyeva «Were shooting...», on-line journal «Oasis», №19, October 2008 www.ca-oasis.info).

²⁹ «On the tragic events of 12-13 September in Ashgabat». Statement made by the Social Political Movement «Watan», www.watan.ru, 22.09.2008.

³⁰ Panner B. «Turkmen Opposition Leader Offers Different Version Of Ashgabat Shot-Out», www.rferl.org, 25.09.2008. The starting date of the events is incorrectly marked as 12 September 2008 here that, apparently, can be attributed to inaccurate information provided by the interviewee.

³¹ Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008.

³² On grenade launchers please see S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008; «The fight goes on», www.chrono-tm.org, 13.09.2008; on snipers' weapons see R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008. Anonymous reports on turkmeny.blogspot.com mention not only a sniper rifle with telescopic vision but also a night optical device which were allegedly in the inventory of the besieged

confirmed (grenade launchers were used not by the terrorists but by governmental forces). There were reservoirs with water in the building but no food.

As mass media report, on that very day the armed runaways from the military unit in Bikrov (outskirts of Ashgabat) had stolen a tank with a full ammunition capacity which was later used by the militants against the governmental forces³³. However, these facts are untrue. It might be that the rumors about the stolen tank and about the military use of the tanks by the governmental forces³⁴ were caused by the gun fire and the movement of heavy and light armoured vehicles across the city streets in the following days.

During the evening of 10 September, the authorities started to close off the area of the plant but they did not dare take any action until the next day. It was unknown how many rebels were in the building. During the night, the district was blocked by the forces of MNS and the Defense Ministry. An emergency operations center was established headed by Chamyrat Amanov, the Minister of National Security. The key roles in the center were played by the MNS officers (they coordinated all actions at middle and low level), representatives of the Interior Ministry and the army.

Some time later, resigned representatives of special services who had immense experience in conducting special operations were also involved. According to unofficial information, one of them was Murad Djummanazarov, a former MNS officer, who used to work for the UN in Ashgabat. He was killed from a gunshot to the head³⁵.

According to the representatives of the Turkmen power structures, from the very beginning they received clear instructions to «detain the criminals alive»³⁶, that, coupled with the inefficient coordination and the absence of trained officers, may account for the protracted operation and the high number of casualties on the side of the governmental forces.

The assailants were repeatedly told via loudspeakers to surrender. Early on 11 September, one of the heads of a special group formed from the representatives of MNS and Interior Ministry, was ordered to «conduct negotiations with the rebels». Saying good-bye to his colleagues, he asked them to «take care of his family». He managed to take just a few steps toward the plant before he was killed by a shot to the head. As the representatives of the special services, who took part in the special operation, say, the militants were not willing to enter into negotiations. Nor did they make any demands³⁷. «It was clear that these people had come to die».

According to the Turkmen security officers, the militants were combat-wise, and this fact gave rise to assumptions that they had possibly undergone military training in Afghanistan³⁸. The militants often changed their fighting positions. Several people were killed from shots fired through the gap in the concrete fence, where the militants were hiding. When attempts were made to approach the building under the cover of the armored personnel carriers (APCs) in the afternoon of 11 September, the militants used hand grenades to stop the attack. This allegedly

«Wahhabites».

³³ S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.

³⁴ On the use of tanks in fights with «terrorists» (see S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.; M. Pender «A new attempt to restore constitutional order failed in Ashgabat», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008, etc)

³⁵ Allegedly, 34 y.o. Djummanazarov who had graduated from the Medical Institute prior to his service in the Committee of the National Security was invited on the third day as an «insider» with medical background supposedly to help the wounded. When he arrived, he was offered the possibility of becoming a member of a snatch squad taking into account his previous experience. He had 2 kids. The authorities promised to provide the family of the killed officer with an apartment and «life-long benefits».

³⁶ On the order to «capture the criminals alive» please see S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.

³⁷ Some sources mention the talks which preceded the assault (for instance, A. Berdyeva «Turkmenistan: shootout in Ashgabat», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008); however, if one does not take into account the report of Ivakhnenko on proclaiming of the Islamic state which is unrealistic, only one publication provides a detailed version of the talks' content: allegedly, the assailants agreed to give in if they were given the opportunity to speak live on TV and meet international journalists (M. Pender. «A new attempt to restore constitutional order in Ashgabat failed», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008). The reliability of this information is unclear.

³⁸ S. Altyeva «Were shooting...», on-line journal «Oasis», №19, October 2008 www.ca-oasis.info).

damaged one of the armored personnel carriers (perhaps it was just broken)³⁹. The governmental forces fired at the building from the APCs and grenade machines; however, they were not effective⁴⁰. During the night, the militants fired at light projectors which had been taken to the site and at the headlights of the vehicles there.

After several unsuccessful attempts to enter the building, the authorities gave up their intention of «detaining the criminals alive». Also, they refused to use their relatives for negotiations as «human shields», although this variant was initially not excluded; relatives were thus kept nearby for such purposes.⁴¹

On 12 September, several artillery tubes were taken to the site. One of them was placed at the gates of the building and used for shooting at the premises. Khodjaguliev was injured by a sniper who was part of the security forces. However, the latter did not dare to assault the building of the plant until the next morning. In the early hours of 13 September, it was discovered that the building was empty. During the cleaning of the plant site, which lasted several hours, the two terrorists were found on the waste ground in the bushes amongst material debris. They had run out of ball cartridges for the submachine guns, thus they were only able to shoot back with pistols for a short period of time. Khodjaguliev, who had been heavily injured, was detained in the afternoon and died on his way to hospital (according to other information, he died after hospitalization). Amandurdyev was killed later in gun battle⁴². The autopsy showed the presence of opiates in the blood of both (apparently, it was this that helped them to hold on for such a long time).

The use of heavy weapons on 12-13 September 2008 was impossible to conceal. On 13 September, the night shootout was covered by the opposition group website www.gundogar.org⁴³ and then by the Austrian-based human rights organization «Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights»⁴⁴. The information on the overnight shootout was confirmed by the U.S. Embassy and then this news was siphoned to the newlines of international agencies. It should be noted that many September publications mentioned the armed clashes on 12-13 September⁴⁵. The dates of 10-13 September, though mentioned in some articles⁴⁶, were often considered «unconfirmed»⁴⁷.

³⁹ Soon this episode was transformed into rumors that the rebels have destroyed 2 APCs from the grenade launcher. This was reported on 13 September by www.chrono-tm.org and soon re-broadcast by other mass media.

⁴⁰ On the use of grenade launchers and APCs and two attempts of assault, please see A. Berdyeva «Turkmenistan: shootout in Ashgabat», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008.

⁴¹ On the detention of Amandurdyev's and Khodjaguliev's relatives, please see S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.

⁴² According to an anonymous publication on-line, Amandurdyev died on site due to the loss of blood at about 3 pm on 13 September. Khodjaguliev whose lungs suffered from bullet wounds was detained in the morning of the same day and later died in hospital (turkmeny.blogspot.com). Some reports argue that both of the terrorists were killed («New details», www.chrono-tm.org, 14.09.2008; S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008). In the same article, Atayeva mentions the completion of the cleansing operation by 4 pm. Radio Liberty refers to the Turkmen dissident Nurberdy Nurmamedov and reports that soon thereafter video has been unofficially circulated in Ashgabat showing Amandurdyev's body lying naked on the surgery table, apparently after an autopsy had been performed (Panner B. «Turkmen Opposition Leader Offers Different Version Of Ashgabat Shot-Out», www.rferl.org, 25.09.2008). In a phone conversation with the author, Nurmamedov specified that he had not seen the video recording; however, he had heard that it had been shown to students of educational establishments, apparently, with the aim of intimidating them (Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008). The demonstration of the above-mentioned video recordings by the authorities to the students is viewed by the author as very unlikely.

⁴³ «Urgent! Police closed off *Khitrovka*», «Law enforcers suffered losses during disorders in *Khitrovka* district», www.gundogar.org, 13.09.2008

⁴⁴ «Special operation is conducted in Ashgabat», «Fight goes on», www.chrono-tm.org, 13.09.2008.

⁴⁵ In a TIHR's publication, the assault of the plant is incorrectly dated as having taken place on 14 September («Raid by special force conducted in the area of the plant», www.chrono-tm.org, 14.09.2008).

⁴⁶ S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008; M. Pender. «A new attempt to restore constitutional order in Ashgabat failed», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008.

⁴⁷ «Rumors that shootout lasted several days are unconfirmed» (R. Safronov. «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008).

In no small measure can this be attributed to the fact that the authors of the articles referred to hardly probable details of the events.

In particular, Selbi Atayeva reported on the emergency situation which was introduced on 10 September in Ashgabat⁴⁸, which remains unconfirmed by other sources. According to the data available, the zone of the incident, closed off by several police and army cordons, was not very extensive⁴⁹, even though the residents of several residential houses were evacuated. The market and all public places in the center, including the market in the Griboyedov Street, located not far from the site of the incident, were operating in the normal regime. On 12 September, the central and southern parts of the city were busy with festive activities: celebrating the state holiday – the anniversary of the creation of the «Rukhmana», the «holy» book of late President Niyazov. Crowds of young people were walking in the streets; in the evening, there were fireworks. On 12 September, President Berdymukhamedov chaired a routine meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers devoted to the results of the past 8 months and the next day he went on a working visit to the Balkan velayat. Until 13 September, many residents were absolutely ignorant about what was happening⁵⁰. It was only on 13-14 September, after the reports of armed clashes that the evening streets of the capital started emptying earlier than usual. In some parts of *Khitrovka*, law enforcers asked local residents not to go outside after 7 pm⁵¹. Long distance calls were available but there were reports of temporary disconnections of phone services in some parts of *Khitrovka*⁵².

In the first days, unrealistic data regarding the group which seized the plant were disseminated. For instance, «Deutsche Welle» reported that the number of rebels varied from 100 to 250 persons, including two snipers. All of them were local residents who had undergone «good military training»⁵³. Selbi Atayeva quotes an anonymous police officer who argued that «there were snipers, including former Afghan war veterans with extensive battle experience»⁵⁴. According to the data provided by another journalist «not only Turkmen but also Russian nationals were among the militants»⁵⁵.

Official reports state that only Amandurdyev and Khodjaguliev were directly involved in the armed clashes.

This statement was met with skepticism by representatives of the journalistic community.

«If, in order to kill only two drug smugglers, the united forces of army, police and special services were needed, this can either mean that they are very weak, or that they were fighting against more serious opponents», Rashid Gullyev says⁵⁶.

⁴⁸ S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008; S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008.

⁴⁹ According to the data provided by the journalist Aisha Berdyeva, on 12 September 2008 one could easily approach the zone of combat by car up to 200-300 meters from either direction. A local resident could even see the bodies of the killed military men which could not be taken away due to the threat to «end up in the cross hairs of the sniper» (A. Berdyeva «Turkmenistan: shootout in Ashgabat», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008).

⁵⁰ See «Shoot-Out Reported in Turkmen Capital», www.frerl.org, 13.09.2008.

⁵¹ «Shoot-Out Reported in Turkmen Capital», www.frerl.org, 13.09.2008. The appeals to the people «not to leave their houses» are also reported by Gulya Poltayeve. She takes it (as we think, without due cause) as a sign of the authorities' fears of possible street disorders which could destabilize the political situation (G. Poltayeve «Armed clashes in Ashgabat as a mirror of the upcoming catastrophe», www.tm-iskra.org, 21.09.2008).

⁵² The Radio Liberty correspondent mentioned that some phone lines were unavailable on 13 September («Shoot-Out Reported in Turkmen Capital», www.frerl.org, 13.09.2008). Nurberdy Nurmamedov, who resides in the *Khitrovka* district, told the author that the connection in his house was not broken (Interview of Memorial Human Rights Center with Nurberdy Nurmamedov, 3.11.2008). The information on the unavailability of a phone connection in *Khitrovka* for 3 days starting from noon on 10 September fails to square with the facts (M. Pender «A new attempt to restore constitutional order in Ashgabat failed», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008).

⁵³ A. Berdyeva «Turkmenistan: shootout in Ashgabat», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008. The same publication makes hints at possible links of the rebels with a Shia mosque in the *Khitrovka* district the operation of which had been banned.

⁵⁴ S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.

⁵⁵ G. Poltayeve «Armed clashes in Ashgabat as a mirror of the upcoming catastrophe», www.tm-iskra.org, 21.09.2008.

⁵⁶ R. Gullyev «All Turkmen warriors», www.dn.kz, 19.09.2008.

The opposition group website «Turkmenskaya Iskra» directly accused the Turkmen authorities of understating the number of opposition members several times⁵⁷.

The statement of the opposition movement «Watan» mentioned a group of 3-5 armed rebels⁵⁸; however, the source of the information remains unclear.

Referring to a MNS officer, Selbi Atayeva, a journalist, argued that apart from the two killed 'resistants', two other fighters were arrested while «many managed to escape» by using underground tunnels⁵⁹.

As of today, the information on the arrested fighters is unconfirmed. According to our source, rumors about underground tunnels which had been dug by the «Wahhabites» in advance, were spread around the city during the events (apparently, as a hypothetical «explanation» for where the large number of «fighters» had gone); however, this is not true. The plant is located in a canal area at high water level, so the construction of underground objects is highly difficult here and even a section of the ordinary mainlines was built above ground. As far as the number of assailants is concerned, the video records of the incident were examined during the investigation in addition to the inspection of the plant's territory, and, according to the special services, they do not contradict the current official account of the events.

Our sources in Turkmenistan note that some rumors about the fugitives appeared by misapprehension: after the «special operation» had been completed, police posters with photos of Amandurdyev and Khodjaguliev still remained in many Turkmen provinces⁶⁰. The report in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* about «a young man who is on a wanted list in the capital suspected of involvement in the Wahhabite's group has run from Ashgabat in the direction of Turkmenabad»⁶¹ is most likely linked to the same rumors.

The «Turkmen initiative for Human Rights» report on the involvement of Russian Special Forces in liquidating the two «fighters»⁶² received much public attention. The information on the involvement of the Russian nationals in the combat operations was given with a reference to the anonymous major of the Turkmen police and later was not confirmed⁶³.

Our source in Turkmenistan reports that the Turkmen authorities did ask Russia for help and several Russian security officials (according to some data, three) did arrive in Ashgabat from the Northern Caucasus on 13 September 2008. However, they did not take part in the events at the plant (at the moment of their arrival, the special operation had already been completed). Yet, shortly after the incident, the decision was made to invite Russian instructors to train Turkmen special forces and exchange experience. Some of these instructors are currently in Ashgabat.

In the light of the events described above, the case of 48 y.o. Turkmen «revolution leader» in exile Gulgeldy Annaniyazov should also be pointed out. Together with «Ajdar», he played a key role in the organization of the antigovernment demonstration in Ashgabat on 12 July 1995.⁶⁴ In June 2008, Annaniyazov illegally crossed the Kazakh-Turkmen border and

⁵⁷ M. Pender «A new attempt to restore constitutional order in Ashgabat failed», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008. Interestingly, at the 15 September sitting of the State Security Council, President Berdymukhamedov mentioned the liquidation of a «large gangsters group» instead of 2 criminals. Now officials comment these words as follows: the President meant not the immediate participants of the armed clashes but all members of the drug network arrested by the special services.

⁵⁸ «On the tragic events occurred in Ashgabat». Statement of the Watan Social Political Movement (www.watan.ru, 22.09.2008).

⁵⁹ S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008.

⁶⁰ See «New details», www.chrono-tm.org, 14.09.2008.

⁶¹ V. Panfilova «A group of drug dealers liquidated in Ashgabat», *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (www.ng.ru), 15.09.2008.

⁶² «New details», www.chrono-tm.org, 14.09.2008.

⁶³ A. Dubnov. «Who needs Turkmen weapons», *Vremya novosti* (www.vremya.ru), 18.09.2008.

⁶⁴ He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment for taking part in this demonstration in January 1996. While in detention, he was exposed to brutal torture; however, due to the active campaign of international organizations he was amnestied 3 years later. Several years later, Annaniyazov restored his contacts with Moscow-based Turkmen opposition leaders. In September 2002, he was detained in Moscow airport «Domodedovo» for trying to enter Russia with a false passport, was deported to Kazakhstan and only due to the active position of U.S. diplomats, he avoided extradition to his home country and received political asylum in Norway (for more details please see Memorial Human Rights Center's press releases in 2002-2003 available at www.memo.ru).

returned to Ashgabat where he was arrested on 24 June in his father's house. On 7 October, he was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment⁶⁵. It should be highlighted that the Turkmen legislation foresees a punishment of up to 5 years for illegal border crossing. The other charges against the Turkmen dissident remain unknown. It cannot be excluded that the strict verdict is linked (formally or informally) to his contacts with the participants of the events of 1995 in Ashgabat (including killed «Ajdar»).

There is another question which needs to be answered: could Amandurdyev participate in a political plot, prevented by the authorities, an exiled writer Akmukhammed Welsapar assumes?⁶⁶ This possibility cannot be excluded at the level of purely speculative assumptions. However, there is no evidence that, having broad connections to certain groups of the population in Ashgabat and the Akhal velayat, in the crisis situation «Ajdar» made any attempts to organize his supporters, disseminate any demands to the authorities or appeals to the city residents. Taking into account all of that listed above, the version related to personal revenge toward a police officer for torturing his wife as the main reason behind the events seems most plausible.

Casualties

The data on the number of casualties is still contradictory.

The official reports of the first days mentioned about 20⁶⁷, 30⁶⁸ or 40 killed⁶⁹ representatives of the power structures. A week after, rumours of 50 killed⁷⁰ were aired in Ashgabat.

An anonymous report placed on a foreign-based opposition website three days after the «special operation» was completed argued that the «special forces suffered losses with 7 persons killed, 11 wounded, some of whom are in a very serious condition»⁷¹ (apparently, only MNS staff are mentioned here)

«Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights» quotes a police major who mentioned 9 killed officers of the special services: 5 from MNS and 4 from the Interior Ministry⁷².

A September publication of Selbi Atayeva refers to the Turkmenistan's MNS and offers the «final data»: 11 persons killed (including terrorists and civilians) and 28 wounded⁷³.

According to our sources, currently most of the security forces' representatives speak of 12 killed and 8 seriously injured⁷⁴, among them is an officer of the Ministry of Defense and the rest are Interior Ministry staff (first casualties) and MNS. During the conduct of the «special operation» the killed and wounded security officers were sent to the hospital of the border

⁶⁵ «Trial over G. Annaniyazov», www.chrono-tm.org, 9.10.2008.

⁶⁶ R. Safronov «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008.

⁶⁷ *Gundogar* website run by Turkmen in exile reported 20 killed policemen («Officers of the Interior Ministry suffered losses during unrests in *Khitrovka*'s districts, www.gundogar.org, 13.09.2008.). The report of «Deutsche Welle» talks «about 20 killed» representatives of power structures (A. Berdyeva «Turkmenistan: shootout in Ashgabat», www.dw-world.de, 15.09.2008). Atayeva mentions «tens of casualties» and quotes an anonymous physician at Ashgabat's hospital named after S. Niyazov who declared that about 18 bodies had been taken to the hospital's mortuary (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008).

⁶⁸ M. Pender «A new attempt to restore constitutional order in Ashgabat failed», www.tm-iskra.org, 14.09.2008.

⁶⁹ Yu. Savchenko «Who was the target of the assault in Ashgabat?», www.news.bbc.co.uk, 15.09.2008.

⁷⁰ G. Poltayeveva «Armed clashes in Ashgabat as a mirror of the upcoming catastrophe», www.tm-iskra.org, 21.09.2008.

⁷¹ «Breaking news first hand», turkmeny.blogspot.com, 16.09.2008. These figures were reproduced in the publication of Rustem Safronov but they are referred to as allegedly consolidated data on the losses of the representatives of the power structures (R. Safronov. «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008).

⁷² «New details», www.chrono-tm.org, 14.09.2008.

⁷³ S. Atayeva «Shootout due to shaving off of beard», www.gzt.ru, 23.09.2008.

⁷⁴ Similar figures are provided in Altyeva's article (S. Altyeva «Were shooting...», on-line journal «Oasis», №19, October 2008 www.ca-oasis.info).

security forces in the south-west of Ashgabat⁷⁵. The bodies of the two killed «terrorists» were taken there as well.

At the same time, one of the law enforcers mentioned about 8 killed and 12 wounded.

The doctor at the hospital declared about 40 killed, including two «terrorists», whose bodies were kept in the mortuary of the hospital (the relatives were not allowed to take them away), and over 100 slightly wounded (those who were not hospitalized).

Almost all sources unanimously argue that there were no casualties among civilians.

It can be assumed that some of the reports listed above have overestimated figures, which include those killed and those who suffered from serious and moderate wounds and were hospitalized.

It appears that the issue of the precise number of casualties needs to be further confirmed.

Consequences

Due to the events of 15 September 2008, a special sitting of the State Security Council of Turkmenistan headed by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was held.

The reports of the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of the National Security and the Prosecutor General of Turkmenistan and the discussions which followed were of closed nature.

Berdymukhamedov required the heads of the power structures to «conduct a thorough analysis of all operations related to the detention of armed criminals, in particular, the reasons behind the mistakes made», and promised awards to the distinguished staff, and the allocation of «decent benefits and pensions» to the family members of those killed and to «help them bring up their children, particularly, with regard to their education»⁷⁶.

It was announced that «special units on combating terrorism» and centers to train the respective specialists by «highly qualified instructors» (supposedly foreign) would be established; the special units of the Interior Ministry and MNS would be equipped with «state-of-the-art devices», and that the infrastructure of the State Service on Drug Combating would be strengthened, and a learning center under this service launched which would possibly serve as a base for carrying out «activities at a regional scale».

Amongst other measures to be employed, the decision on the construction of 12 new frontier posts to replace current ones should be mentioned (according to unofficial sources, most on the border with Iran and Afghanistan).

As our source reports, this decision reflects the concern of the political authorities about the intrusion and potential interference of «external forces» in the internal affairs of Turkmenistan (the detected drug network led by Iranians, is perceived as a potential «fifth column»).

Perhaps, it is worth agreeing with the view of Rustem Safronov, the journalist, who argues that the fact that the events in Ashgabat was placed on the agenda of the State Security Council shows a sort of break from Niyazov's practice of silencing negative reports⁷⁷ (one can

⁷⁵ According to Atayeva's information, the wounded servicemen were taken to the hospital in the south-west of Ashgabat while those who suffered from stray bullets were taken to Niyazov's hospital (S. Atayeva «Fight for independence: Ashgabat has gone through a war against drugs», www.gzt.ru, 16.09.2008). There is also information that initially those killed in the shootout with «terrorists» were taken to *Zheleznodorojnaya hospital* which was located near the site (G. Poltayeva «Armed clashes in Ashgabat as a mirror of the upcoming catastrophe», www.tm-iskra.org, 21.09.2008). However, the statement of the same source on the further transportation of the bodies of those killed to Niyazov's hospital is not confirmed.

⁷⁶ «Sitting of the State Security Council of Turkmenistan», *Neutral Turkmenistan* official daily newspaper, 16.09.2008.

⁷⁷ R. Safronov «Ashgabat – a turbulent city», www.runewsweek.ru, 22.09.2008.

recall the 1998 events in armored regiment in Kazanjik⁷⁸, which were never mentioned in the Turkmen mass media).

Also, there is information that during internal discussions in the power ministries, it was suggested that an official report on the events be published in order to stop the rumours; however, the position of the «conservatives» has prevailed (this reflects the absence of true political reforms in the country).

As of today, there are no facts which would allow one to talk about the long-term consequences of the September incident. Many residents of *Khirtovka* perceive «Ajdar» and Akhmed as national heroes, «true Turkmens», who defended the honor of their families and came out against the arbitrariness of the law enforcement agencies. A recent case is reported when a city resident told the policemen in a conflict situation: «If you don't stop your cheeky behavior, «Ajdar» will come back» (meaning the possibility of appearance of new «folk avengers»). At the same time, people residing in other parts of Ashgabat view the incident in more of an indifferent light. As a whole, the population acted rather as a passive observer than potential participants of the events.

The author would be grateful for any additions and comments to the report.

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⁷⁸ On 12 September 1998, 5 servicemen of the 22nd Motorized Rifle Division armed with submachine guns and pistols left their military unit in the city of Kazanjik, seized a vehicle and tried to battle through to Ashgabat. After they were discovered in the Bakharden district, they took hostages in a local village and demanded a plane to fly to Russia or Israel. Early on 13 September 1998, 4 of them were killed and one was detained in the course of a large-scale multi-agency operation with the use of APCs. Some of the hostages were also killed (for details please see V. Ponomarev «Turkmenistan: Official Chronicles of the 1998 events in the Kazanjik tank regiment», 15.09.2001, www.memo.ru/hr/politpr/asia/2004/svid-tu/kazand.htm).