'Torture By Hunger': Horse Breeder Describes Desperate Days In Turkmen Prison

December 5, 2015

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Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty

http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-tortured-by-hunger-prison-kyarizov/27408793.html

After armed guards led Geldy Kyarizov through the gates of Ovadan Depe, a prison in the Turkmen desert outside Ashgabat, they tore the sack off his head and told him, "Only God can help you now."

A little later, cellmates in the maximum-security prison's "special block" had another warning for the newcomer: "Nobody has left this place alive yet," they told him. "People only arrive here."

Kyarizov did get out alive, though. Sentenced to six years in prison on charges he says were groundless, he was abruptly freed in 2007 after eccentric autocrat Saparmurat Niyazov died and was succeeded as president by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who has made moderate changes but continues to rule Turkmenistan with an iron hand.

In a rare account of life in the secretive former Soviet republic's toughest prison, Kyarizov described Ovadan Depe as a "horrific" place whose inmates rarely saw the sky and were starved to the point of emaciation and despair.

"They do not torture inmates with electricity or tear the flesh off their bodies with red-hot tongs. No, it is not necessary to do that there. People are simply deprived of food there -- they torture by hunger," he told RFE/RL by telephone from Moscow, where he has been living since he left Turkmenistan in September.

"Only skin and bones are left," Kyarizov said of the inmates. "And they look at each other like monkeys in a zoo."

Seven Minutes Of Sky

Ovadan Depe means "picturesque hill" -- a name derived from the prison's location on a rare rise in the Kara-Kum desert 50 kilometers northwest of Ashgabat, the Central Asian country's capital.

The name is a piece of bitter irony for inmates, according to Kyarizov. When he was there, prisoners were allowed outside their cells once a week, for seven minutes, when they were escorted out of the special block for a shower and a shave.

"In those seven minutes, while they take you through a corridor -- a 3-meter by 4-meter room with a metal grate above -- you can see the sky," he said. "Nobody sees the sky otherwise. In the cell, the window has a very thick metal grid and it is covered by metal blinds on the outside. You cannot see anything directly through it. You have to bend to be able to see the sky."

Kyarizov's life has been shaped by the whims of Turkmenistan's autocratic leaders.

A longtime champion of the desert country's iconic Akhal Teke horse breed, he was instrumental in returning the majestic animal to prominence after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union -- whose government had barred individuals from breeding and owning the horses in order to discourage private farming and nationalist sentiment and allowed the rare horses' meat to be used for consumption, which went against Turkmen traditions and mentality.

Known for the natural metallic sheen of its coat and its grace as a show jumper, the Akhal Teke evokes Turkmenistan's cherished nomadic heritage. It is featured on the country's post-Soviet seal.

Kyarizov's role in the reversal of the breed's fortunes made him something of a national hero and landed him a place in the elite under Niyazov, who appointed him minister of horse breeding.

The ministry was later transformed into the Turkmen Atlary (Turkmen Horses) State Agency, which Kyarizov led until he suffered an abrupt change of fortune: He was arrested on December 31, 2002, on charges of negligence and abuse of office that he said were groundless and politically motivated.

Suspected, Never Charged

Kyarizov, who is now 64, was swept up in a purge launched by Niyazov after what Turkmen authorities said was an assassination attempt against him five weeks earlier, on November 25.

Several dozen so-called Novembrists -- former officials associated with the alleged ringleader, then-Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov -- are known to have been imprisoned in Ovadan Depe, which Niyazov ordered built the same year to house convicted political activists, opposition figures, and alleged Islamic extremists.

Shikhmuradov, who was sentenced to life in prison, was widely believed to have been held in Ovadan Depe as well -- but there have been widespread reports saying that he was tortured to death.

Turkmen officials have never revealed Shikhmuradov's location, and have neither confirmed nor denied reports of his death.

The authorities did not formally accuse Kyarizov of involvement in the alleged assassination plot, but he was under constant pressure over suspicions among the authorities -- which he says were misplaced -- that he was a member of Shikhmuradov's circle.

Hard Time

He spent nearly five years in a string of jails and prisons before he was sent to Ovadan Depe in 2006. "They brought me to the Ovadan Depe prison with a sack on my head," he said.

After it was removed, Kyarizov was quickly struck by the security at Ovadan Depe, which was much tighter than at any of the other lockups at which he had been held.

Some of the cells were shut behind iron doors bearing the inscription: "To be opened only in presence of three services: Interior Ministry, KGB and Prosecutor's Office," he said.

Former officials, including Kyarizov, were held in the prison's separate "special block," an imposing structure whose main gate opened vertically to ensure it could never be left ajar.

Inside, each cell had a vertical door and a second lattice door with a hole for food delivery, he said, adding that "it is also locked and sealed. Nobody can open it."

A Trickle Of Food

Life in the cells was miserable, but Kyarizov soon encountered a more pressing problem: Hunger.

Kyarizov's cellmates were so thin that they looked "scary." And they told him that a few months before his arrival, prominent politician Geday Akhmedov -- a former provincial governor who had been decorated by Niyazov as a Hero of Turkmenistan -- starved to death in the same cell.

Kyarizov struggled to avoid that fate.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner was a thin slice of bread and a small portion of watery millet porridge with no meat, oil, or fat in it -- but, like the bread, with plenty of sand and small stones.

At lunch, each inmate also got a plastic bowl of "soup" -- just boiled water, sometimes with a few scraps of onion or potatoes.

A cup of weak, tepid tea was allowed in the morning, and replaced at lunch and dinner with the boiled leaves of the camelthorn plant.

According to Kyarizov, the food given to inmates was made with leftovers from the meals cooked for the armed guards, young Turkmen conscripts.

"In just five months I lost almost 40 kilograms. I weighed 96 kilograms when they brought me to Ovadan Depe, and my weight was 59 when I was released," Kyarizov said. "That is just in five months -- imagine what happens to those who spend years there."

Surviving Niyazov

Kyarizov was fortunate enough not to find out.

He spent five months at the prison before his release, which followed Niyazov's death in December 2006 and a swift, opaque succession process that put Berdymukhammedov in the presidency.

Berdymukhammedov pardoned Kyarizov weeks after becoming Turkmenistan's new president.

Still president today, Berdymukhammedov has lessened Turkmenistan's isolation somewhat, cultivating ties with rival powers attracted by its natural-gas riches, including the United States, Europe, Russia, and China. But any who hoped Niyazov's death would usher in a new era of rights and freedoms have been disappointed: Turkmenistan remains officially neutral and highly repressive.x



Kyarizov's recollections of Ovadan Depe are echoed by more recent reports from groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty international, and Crude Accountability about conditions there.

Crude Accountability, a U.S.-based organization that focuses on petroleum-impacted communities in the Caspian Sea region, said in a 2014 report that "torture is widespread in Ovadan Depe."

"Beatings are a regular occurrence.... Sources describe the use of dogs, batons, and subsequent loss of consciousness, damage to the kidneys, and the inability to walk," the report said. "'Kartsers' or cylindrical dark solitary confinement cells, are also used as a means of torture. The minuscule amounts of food and water, combined with mosquito infestations and extreme temperatures made the stays in the kartsers a psychologically and physically impossible form of torture."

The report's description of food, or lack of it, is similar to Kyarizov's account. It said a source who spent several years in Ovadan Depe "received no food except hot wheat porridge and pumpkin, which was passed to the inmates inside their cells. There was never any meat."

People 'Must Speak Out'

Kyarizov told RFE/RL that his release saved his life. But he was barred from leaving Turkmenistan after he refused to publicly express his gratitude to Berdymukhammedov in a televised statement.

And he found himself shut out of the horse-breeding business, unable to find a job working with the animals due to his "criminal record."

The authorities took the last of his horses, which had been kept by his wife, Yulia Serebryannik, and had his house razed, saying it had been built illegally -- another claim Kyarizov called groundless and politically motivated.

Kyarizov had to abort an attempt to leave Turkmenistan in December 2014. With Russian visas and tickets to Moscow in hand, he and his family went to the airport only to have their documents canceled by officials who said they were barred from leaving the country.

But in September he and close relatives were permitted to leave one by one -- a change of heart he ascribes to international pressure on Turkmenistan to improve its human rights record.

Still, Kyarizov has no plans to return to Turkmenistan, where he fears he and his family would not be safe.

But he said people who want change in Turkmenistan should speak out. "If they keep their mouths shut, this situation will never end," Kyarizov said.

Silence "gives tyrants a free hand," he added. "Keeping silent is bad. I say that not because I am now free and therefore I am brave. No. I say that because I know that thousands of people are still in jails there."