

Red Cross Visits Turkmen Jails

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A delegation from the International Committee of the Red Cross has visited prisons in Turkmenistan, a landmark development for the isolated country.

The ICRC said in a statement Monday that a visiting delegation held talks with government officials on further cooperation in the future.

Turkmenistan's authoritarian government has long been criticized for refusing international access to inmates in detention and prison.

While the ICRC provided no details on its findings from last week's visit at an Interior Ministry-run jail and another penitentiary under construction, the tour appears to be a breakthrough following a series of meetings.

Foreign-based Turkmen rights activists say the country's jails are overcrowded and that disease is rife. Authorities are believed to routinely imprison dissidents.

A 2010 report by the foreign-based Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights estimated that there were about 8,100 inmates in the

country at the time.

The exact number fluctuates considerably, however, because of periodic widespread amnesties, and no official figures are made available.

After coming to power in 2006, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov promised democratic reforms. Critics say those promises have not been kept.

In March, the UN Human Rights Committee decried what it said was an increase in reports of torture and ill treatment in places of detention.

It also expressed concern at the lack of independent investigations into abuse by police and the denial to nongovernmental observers of regular access to prisons.

Berdymukhammedov has implemented largely token measures to reduce the overcrowding.

But with virtually no public scrutiny of government policy permitted, it is unclear to what extent those measures have been adopted.

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