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Uzbekistan: Journalist imprisoned

Amnesty International today called for the immediate and unconditional release of Uzbekistani journalist and human rights activist Umida Niazova. The organization was reacting to news today that Umida Niazova was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment after an unfair trial.

"Amnesty International considers Umida Niazova to be a prisoner of conscience, sentenced solely for carrying out her human rights activities," said Halya Gowan, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

"The authorities of Uzbekistan are obliged to guarantee the right of human rights defenders to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals."

Amnesty International is concerned that her trial was not carried out in accordance with fair trial standards. The judge apparently did not give witnesses for the prosecution and defence adequate time to respond to questions and reportedly prompted them from their initial signed statements to the police. He also reportedly interrupted Umida Niazova repeatedly while she questioned witnesses. The access to the trial was restricted.

The 32-year old Umida Niazova was detained on 22 January in Andizhan, in the south-east of the country, near the border with Kyrgyzstan, where she spent the first four days of her detention unable to communicate with the outside world. On 26 January she was moved to the capital Tashkent. She was charged with illegally crossing the Uzbekistani border under Article 223 of the Uzbekistani Criminal Code and with smuggling literature of a subversive and "extremist" nature into the country under Article 246.

The main charge against Umida Niazova -- smuggling -- relates to an earlier incident on 21 December 2006 when she was detained for nine hours by transport police as she cleared customs at Tashkent airport. She had just returned from a human rights seminar in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Although she was released after questioning, police confiscated her laptop computer, flashcard and passport. Among the materials contained on the laptop was reportedly the published report on the Andizhan mass killings in May 2005 by the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch (HRW). Umida Niazova has been working for HRW's office in Tashkent as a translator. She had previously worked for the international freedom of expression NGOs, Internews and Freedom House.

"By imprisoning Umida Niazova, the authorities of Uzbekistan are trying to intimidate her and other human rights activists. This is also another step in stifling freedom of expression and civil society," Halya Gowan said.

Umida Niazova can appeal her sentence in the next 10 days.

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