

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Kyrgyzstan: Amnesty International mourns the loss of a courageous human rights defender**

Amnesty International is deeply saddened by the news of Azimjan Askarov's death in Kyrgyzstan at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in that country. A prisoner of conscience, tenacious human rights defender and talented artist, he died in prison on 25 July at the age of 69. We express our deep condolences to the family of Azimjan and especially to his wife, Hadicha.

Azimjan spent ten years in prison after being sentenced to life imprisonment in September 2010 for his purported role in the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. Amnesty International believes that the charges against him were fabricated to prevent him from carrying out his human rights work. The investigation and trial were marred by fair trial violations and Azimjan's credible allegations that he was tortured in pre-trial detention were never properly investigated.

Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have continuously campaigned for Azimjan's release since he was arrested on 25 June 2010 on fabricated charges. Despite tireless efforts by the international community, that included both public campaigning and quiet advocacy, the Kyrgyzstani authorities have time and time again failed to make use of opportunities presented to them to make right a terrible injustice.

In March 2016, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the government of Kyrgyzstan to immediately release Azimjan and quash his conviction. It concluded that Azimjan had been arbitrarily detained, held in inhumane conditions, tortured and otherwise ill-treated without redress, and not given a fair trial. Although the decision prompted a judicial review of his case, in January 2017, the Bishkek court upheld the conviction and the sentence.

In April 2016, the European Union External Action Service called on Kyrgyzstan to "fully implement" the Committee's ruling. More recently, in January 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the EU-Kyrgyzstan comprehensive agreement calling for Azimjan's immediate release and full rehabilitation, and for Kyrgyzstan to quash his conviction and provide him with reparation. There have been countless other international calls for his release. In April 2020, [Amnesty International once more issued a call for his immediate release](#), specifically pointing out that his life was at serious risk amid the spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan. All these calls were callously ignored by the Kyrgyzstani authorities, and the innocent man remained in prison until his death.

Over the years the local NGO "Bir Duino" and local lawyer Valeryan Vahitov tirelessly made repeated judicial appeals to review Azimjan's case. The result was always negative. Most recently lawyer Valeryan Vahitov officially appealed after changes to the Criminal Code in 2019, but on 13 May 2020 the Supreme Court again upheld the life sentence. This was the last hope to have the case reviewed and to save the unjustly imprisoned human rights defender's life.

On 18 March 2019, Azimjan was transferred from temporary detention facility SIZO-1 in Bishkek to Prison Colony No. 19 in the Chuy region. According to reports, following the transfer Azimjan was placed in solitary confinement as punishment for his protest against the restrictions on family visits that he had encountered at the colony. Since then Amnesty International received numerous reports about Azimjan's consistently deteriorating ill-health after years in prison. He suffered from cardiac and respiratory problems and had not been receiving adequate medical care. In the context of the deadly spread of COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan, not only was his life at increased risk, but in practical terms he was facing a death sentence.

A few days ago, Valeryan Vahitov visited Azimjan in Prison Colony No. 19. He reported that the human rights defender was no longer able to walk unaided and was brought to the meeting by two guards. He had lost weight, was coughing and was so breathless that it was difficult for him to talk. He was eating very little and had been given glucose injections. He had been ill for well over a week.

At the insistence of the lawyer, on 24 July Azimjan was transferred to a prison hospital in Colony No. 47 only the day before his death. The official cause of death is "double pneumonia". Until 16 July, many COVID-19 deaths in Kyrgyzstan were recorded as "double pneumonia" or "non-hospital pneumonia", as COVID-19 often causes pneumonia. The lawyer is waiting for the official medical report.

Azimjan Askarov's tragic death demonstrates how Kyrgyzstan's judicial system is failing its citizens and particularly how it is failing to protect ethnic minority communities in the country.

The death of Azimjan Askarov is a tragic page in the modern history of Kyrgyzstan. At the very least the authorities must thoroughly and impartially investigate the cause of Azimjan's death and share this information with the family and his lawyer. Those who failed to provide due medical attention must be held accountable for their wrongdoing.

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