

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Uzbekistan: More than 140,000 people across the world demand the release of Uzbekistani journalist Muhammad Bekzhanov**

On Muhammad Bekzhanov's 61<sup>st</sup> birthday more than 140,000 Amnesty International supporters are calling on the president of Uzbekistan to ensure his immediate release. Muhammad Bekzhanov is one of the world's longest-imprisoned journalists.

Muhammad Bekzhanov has spent the last 16 years in prison despite claiming at his trial in 1999 that he had been tortured into confessing to fabricated charges. He stated that he had been beaten with rubber truncheons, suffocated, and given electric shocks. The court disregarded his torture allegations. To date no investigation has been carried out into Muhammad Bekzhanov's claims and no perpetrators have been identified and brought to justice.

Muhammad Bekzhanov's case is not unique in Uzbekistan. In April 2015, Amnesty International published a report on torture in Uzbekistan, [Secrets and Lies: Forced confessions under torture in Uzbekistan](#), as part of the global Stop Torture campaign. The report concluded that torture and other ill-treatment and the admission in criminal trials of evidence extracted under torture remain persistent problems in Uzbekistan.

Torture and other ill-treatment have effectively become defining features of the Uzbekistani criminal justice system. They are central to how the Uzbekistani authorities deal with dissent, combat actual or perceived security threats and repress political opponents.

Men and women in this repressive state are routinely pressured to sign confessions in the most brutal ways imaginable. Courts continue to rely heavily on these torture-tainted "confessions" to convict. Judges routinely ignore or dismiss allegations of torture or other ill-treatment as unfounded allegations, even when presented with credible evidence in court. The Uzbekistani Criminal Procedure Code does not expressly and comprehensively prohibit the use of torture to extract confessions or other testimony and does not effectively preclude the admissibility of such evidence in court. Thus, Amnesty International members and supporters are also calling on the president of Uzbekistan to issue a Presidential Decree requiring the Criminal Procedure Code to be amended to include an absolute and explicit prohibition on the use of torture to obtain testimony or confessions and the use of torture-tainted evidence in criminal and other proceedings, except as evidence of abuse in a case against an alleged perpetrator.

Uzbekistan remains closed to effective international scrutiny. In recent years no independent international organizations, Amnesty International included, have been granted unimpeded access to the country to carry out fully independent human rights monitoring. Currently, there are 13 pending requests for country visits by the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, including the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Signatures under [the petition](#) were collected across 129 countries. The petition is a part of Amnesty International's global Stop Torture campaign, launched in May 2014.

### **CASE OF MUHAMMAD BEKZHANOV**

Muhammad Bekzhanov, the-Editor-in-Chief of the banned Erk political opposition party newspaper, left Uzbekistan in 1993 due to persecution, harassment and intimidation by the authorities in connection to his association with Erk.

On 16 February 1999 six bombs exploded in Tashkent. Thirteen people died and more than 100 were injured. In the aftermath, the Uzbekistani security forces arbitrarily detained hundreds of alleged suspects, including members of independent Islamic congregations, and members and supporters of banned political opposition parties and movements and their families. Muhammad Bekzhanov was forcibly returned to Uzbekistan from Ukraine on 18 March 1999, following the Tashkent bombings. He was held incommunicado until the end of April 1999.

During his trial in August 1999, Muhammad Bekzhanov issued a statement together with his five co-defendants, alleging that they had been tortured in pre-trial detention in order to force them to confess to fabricated charges that implicated him in the February 1999 bombing, and also implicated the exiled Erk leader Muhammad Salih. Muhammad Bekzhanov alleged, among other things, that he had been beaten with rubber truncheons and plastic bottles filled with water, suffocated, and given electric shocks. After his testimony the trial judge gave the defence lawyers just 40 minutes for the presentation of their case. The court did not take into account any of Muhammad Bekzhanov's allegations of torture or forced confession and based its verdict on his confession. On 18 August 1999, the court sentenced him to 15 years in prison for his alleged participation in the February 1999 bombings.

He was due to be released in February 2012. However, in January 2012, a court in the town of Kasan, close to the prison colony where he was serving his sentence at the time, sentenced him to a further four years and eight months in prison for allegedly violating prison rules. Family members reported that Muhammad Bekzhanov told the court that he had not infringed a single prison rule in 13 years and that it was strange that he should start breaking rules just weeks before his scheduled release. An appeal court upheld the additional sentence in March 2012.

No effective investigation into any of the allegations of torture has been conducted despite numerous complaints lodged with the competent authorities by Muhammad Bekzhanov, his lawyer and his family over the years.

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