

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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UZBEKISTAN: ATTACKS ON BLOGGER MUST BE INVESTIGATED AND THE PERPETRATORS BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

Miraziz Bazarov, a blogger from Uzbekistan, was severely beaten by unidentified masked people in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, on 28 March 2021. Prior to the attack Bazarov had criticised current government policies in his Telegram channel and TikTok account, including the authorities' refusal to decriminalise consensual sexual relations between men.

On 28 March Bazarov was admitted to hospital with critical injuries, including a cranial fracture and a broken leg. Witnesses reported that late that night he was attacked near his house by three unidentified masked men, one of them carrying a baseball bat. Supporters of the blogger link the attack to an online hate campaign against Bazarov: in his earlier video messages Bazarov had warned of possible physical attacks against him.

In his Telegram channel Bazarov shared screenshots of numerous death threats and verbal attacks he had received on social media in response to his posts. The comments used homophobic language and sought to discredit him. Police in Tashkent have opened an investigation into the 28 March physical attack.

In his Telegram blog @bazarov_channel, Miraziz Bazarov has actively expressed his opinion on various decisions and policies of the government, including economic conditions in Uzbekistan and the upcoming October 2021 presidential election. He has explicitly defended the rights of women and LGBTI people. After Bazarov called for a boycott of the presidential election he started receiving death threats and verbal attacks through social media. Bazarov shared screenshots and links to social media accounts that showed an orchestrated online smear campaign using intimidation techniques and homophobic language. In one Youtube video a religious activist explicitly invited his followers to physically attack the blogger.

An investigation into Bazarov's earlier complaints of death threats has not yet been opened. Amnesty International calls on the government of Uzbekistan to investigate both the physical and the online homophobic attacks on the blogger and to prosecute those responsible. Uzbekistan has an obligation under international law to protect journalists and bloggers against any risks arising from their professional activities; these include not only threats to their physical integrity but also violations of their right to freedom of expression and that of others.

BACKGROUND

Earlier on 28 March, dozens of men walked the streets of central Tashkent, violating the government's restriction of mass gatherings and chanting slogans and shouting angrily against LGBTI people. A scuffle followed, and twelve people were detained by the police and charged with hooliganism. The Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a statement in which it explained that the men had attacked two "suspected LGBTI activists", but police had intervened and prevented escalation or serious injuries.¹

Although the Uzbekistani Constitution guarantees privacy, equality and non-discrimination, Uzbekistan is one of only two Central Asian countries that retain legislation criminalising consensual sexual relations between men. Article 120 of the current Criminal Code punishes consensual sexual relations between adult men by up to three years' imprisonment. Uzbekistan is currently drafting a new Criminal Code and the content of Article 120 is expected to be retained in Article 154 of the new code. The government should take this opportunity to improve its human rights record and repeal discriminatory legislation that punishes individuals for the peaceful exercise of their human rights.

¹ <https://iibb.uz/uz/news/rasmij-habar>

In Uzbekistan LGBTI people are routinely subjected to arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment, persecution, and surveillance by state and non-state actors². Homophobic mobs frequently target LGBTI individuals and those perceived to be gay, subjecting them to physical abuse and extortion. On internet-based messaging services homophobic activists disseminate the names and contact details of gay and bisexual men and those perceived to be gay and call for them to be “punished” and killed. Videos of such beatings have been disseminated and there are credible reports that several gay men have been murdered or severely injured in homophobic attacks in recent years.

² <https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Uzbekistan.pdf>