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KYRGYZSTAN: JOURNALIST REMAINS A PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE AFTER INCONCLUSIVE TRIAL OUTCOME

The journalist and prisoner of conscience Yrysbek Omurzakov should be released immediately and unconditionally, Amnesty International said today after a judge halted trial proceedings but ordered him to be returned to custody while the libel case against him is re-investigated.

“This trial should never have started,” Amnesty International said. “The Kyrgyzstani authorities have already been internationally condemned for bringing a criminal prosecution in what should be a civil case of libel. They are clearly using criminal legislation in a bogus manner to punish and silence a prominent government critic.”

Yrysbek Omurzakov was arrested in March on a criminal charge of libelling a factory manager, Mikhail Paryshkura, in an article in the independent newspaper *Res Publika*. Critical of the government's privatization policies, the article featured a workers' hostel attached to a factory in the capital, Bishkek, where residents were resisting moves by managers allegedly to privatize it into their own hands. Yrysbek Omurzakov was ordered to be detained pending trial on the grounds that he might otherwise flee the country. The trial opened on 19 May.

Also on trial with Yrysbek Omurzakov were two women residents of the workers' hostel, Damira Akmatova and Gulya Ibraimova, facing a criminal charge of knowingly providing false information to the journalist. They have not been in detention during the investigation. Amnesty International is also calling for criminal proceedings against them to be dropped.

This is the latest in a serious of cases, going back at least two years, in which the human rights organization has criticized the inappropriate use of criminal defamation charges to stifle free speech by journalists and opposition political activists in Kyrgyzstan. Yrysbek Omurzakov already has one criminal conviction for libelling the President of Kyrgyzstan, for which he received a two-year suspended prison sentence in 1996.

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For further information on the cases of Yrysbek Omurzakov, Damira Akmatova and Gulya Ibraimova, see the Amnesty International report *Kyrgyzstan - Prisoners of conscience back on trial: The cases of Topchubek Turgunaliyev and Yrysbek Omurzakov* (AI Index: EUR 58/08/97).

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