

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Uzbekistan: Artist facing charges of slander and insult

Amnesty International is concerned about the charges of slander and insult against Umida Ahmedova, a prominent photographer and documentary filmmaker who has been recording people's lives in Uzbekistan. A court hearing has been set for 9 February at the Mirabad district court in Tashkent city. If convicted, Umida Ahmedova may face up to three years in jail. Amnesty International would consider her to be a prisoner of conscience, detained for the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression, and calls on the Uzbekistani authorities to withdraw the charges.

The charges are based on the content of some of Umida Ahmedova's photographs and film projects which are interpreted by Uzbekistani authorities as slandering and insulting the Uzbekistani people and their traditions.

In 2007, Umida Ahmedova had published a photo album under the title "Women and Men – from Dawn to Dusk", which focused on gender inequalities in Uzbekistan. The photo album was sponsored by the Swiss embassy in Tashkent. In 2008 she produced a film, "The Burden of Virginity", which explored the traditional obligations on women to prove their virginity on their wedding night and has not yet been shown to the wider public.

Umida Ahmedova learned about investigations against her and her colleagues' work on 17 November 2009 when an investigator of Tashkent police station summoned her as a witness. On 16 December, she was called to Mirabad Department of Internal Affairs where she was informed about a criminal investigation opened into her documentary work on charges of defamation and insult, following a request by the State Press and Information Agency, and that her status had been changed from a witness to a suspect.

On 13 January, Umida Ahmedova was presented with the conclusions of an "expert working group" assigned by the office of the Prosecutor General to evaluate her photographs and documentary film. The "expert group", reportedly composed of psychologists, experts on religious matters, propaganda and spirituality, did not include any experts on human rights or gender. After analyzing the above-mentioned photo album and documentary film the "expert group" held that the documentary film is damaging the country's image, denigrating its national traditions and undermining spiritual and moral values. Furthermore, the "expert group" concluded that in the photo album Umida Ahmedova aimed to show only the "dark side of life in Uzbekistan", and recommended to ban her work from public distribution.

On 23 January, Umida Ahmedova was officially charged with the offences of slander, pursuant to Article 139, and insult, pursuant to Article 140 of the Uzbekistani Criminal Code, based on the analysis of the State Press and Information Agency and the conclusions of the “expert group”. A court hearing is due to take place on 9 February in the Mirabad district court in Tashkent city.

Amnesty International considers that the charges against Umida Ahmedova constitute a violation of her right to freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Uzbekistan is a state party. Moreover, the organization is concerned that the criminal proceedings against Umida Ahmedova may be aimed at intimidating other artists who are documenting traditional practices that discriminate against women and girls.

Background Information

Amnesty International remains gravely concerned about the deterioration of respect for the freedom of expression in Uzbekistan as well as the continued targeting of human rights defenders, civil society activists, political opposition activists and independent journalists. These measures have created a climate of fear among civil society. At least four people were sentenced to long prison sentences in 2009 after unfair trials and others have faced short-term detention, beatings and accusations of harming the reputation of the country.

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