

PUBLIC

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Fear of forcible deportation/
fear of torture

29 November 2001

CZECH REPUBLIC/UZBEKISTAN

Muhammad SALIH, aged 52

Exiled Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih was arrested by Czech police when he arrived at Prague airport on 28 November, reportedly at the request of the Uzbek authorities. He may now be forcibly returned to Uzbekistan, where he would be at grave risk of torture. Muhammad Salih has had refugee status in Norway since 1999, and the Czech authorities should allow him to return to Norway, for the Norwegian authorities to decide on any request for extradition.

Muhammad Salih is the leader of the banned *Erk* Democratic Party of Uzbekistan. He had travelled to Prague at the invitation of the Uzbek Service of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. He was detained at passport control at 10am, and the police reportedly did not allow him to use a telephone until 7pm. He called his son and told him that he had been detained at the request of Uzbekistan. A court hearing will take place on 30 November to decide on possible deportation to Uzbekistan.

The Czech Republic is a state party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the Refugee Convention) and the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Both of these prohibit the return of a person to a country or territory where they may face serious human rights violations. There are similar provisions in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In February 1999 16 people died in bomb explosions in the centre of the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. The Uzbek authorities have used the bomb explosions and other violent incidents to justify a clampdown on individuals and groups they perceive as a threat to their authority and the country's stability.

President Karimov blamed Muhammad Salih for the bombings, and state-owned newspapers, radio and TV stations described him as a traitor, a murderer and a terrorist. The Uzbek authorities have accused him of being one of the leaders of an international conspiracy aiming to overthrow the government. In November 2000 the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan sentenced Muhammad Salih *in absentia* to 15 and a half years' imprisonment on charges of terrorism and treason in connection with the bombings. Muhammad Salih has always denied the charges and has insisted that they were fabricated by the authorities to punish him for his non-violent opposition activities.

Hundreds of people] have reportedly been arrested during the clampdown that followed the explosions, and allegedly ill-treated and tortured. They range from members and suspected supporters of the banned secular political opposition parties and movements *Erk* and *Birlik*, to alleged supporters of banned Islamic opposition movements or parties, such as *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, and their relatives, as well as independent human rights monitors. Thousands of devout Muslims and dozens of members or supporters of *Erk* and *Birlik* are now serving long prison sentences, convicted after unfair trials of membership of an illegal party, distribution of illegal religious literature and anti-state activities.

Muhammad Salih founded *Erk* in 1990; it was officially registered as Uzbekistan's first opposition political party the following year, and Salih ran for president. Following a clampdown against government opponents *Erk* was effectively banned in 1993, and Muhammad Salih went into exile soon afterwards.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that Uzbekistan may use the "international fight against terrorism" as an opportunity to further clamp down on the country's internal opposition, with greater impunity than ever before. Uzbekistan, which borders Afghanistan, is one of the main allies of

the US-led coalition in the region. At least 1,000 US ground troops are based at the Khanabad military base in the south of the country.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Czech, English or your own language:

- urging the Czech authorities not to forcibly return Muhammad Salih to Uzbekistan, where he would be in grave danger of torture and cruel and inhuman treatment;
- reminding the authorities that the Czech Republic is a party to the UN Refugee Convention; the United Nations Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;
- reminding the Czech government that Muhammad Salih has been recognized as a refugee in Norway and that he should be returned to Norway for the Norwegian authorities to deal with the extradition request.

APPEALS TO:

President

Václav Havel
President of the Czech Republic
Prazsky Hrad
Praha 1
11908
CZECH REPUBLIC

Telegram: President Havel, Prazsky Hrad, Prague, Czech Republic

email: president@hrad.cz

Salutation: Dear President Havel

Minister of the Interior

Mr Stanislav Gross
Nad štolou 3
170 34 Prague 7

Fax: + 42 02 614 33560/33552/33553

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Government Commissioner for Human Rights
Jan Jarab
Government Office
Vladislovova 4
11000 Prague 1 - Nové Mesto
Czech Republic

Fax: + 42 02 961 53358

+ 42 02 249 46615

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Jan Kavan
Loretánské nám_stí 5
125 10 Prague 1

Fax: + 42 02 243 10017

and to diplomatic representatives of the Czech Republic accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 January 2001.