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Kyrgyzstan: Tightening the screws on human rights activities?

Kyrgyzstan may be joining the list of countries that seriously restrict the space for human rights activities, Amnesty International warned today.

Vitali Ponomarev, the director of the Central Asia programme of the Russian human rights organization Memorial, a long standing expert on the region and an outspoken advocate for human rights in Central Asia, was denied entry to Kyrgyzstan in the morning of 26 February 2009.

According to local journalists, the deportation from the airport near the capital Bishkek, follows on from a decision to ban the human rights defender from Kyrgyzstan for five years taken by the National Security Service two days prior to Vitali Ponomarev's arrival.

"The decision to ban a critical human rights defender from Kyrgyzstan may have been linked directly to his human rights activities," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"It is a worrying sign of a tendency elsewhere in the region to suppress any attempt to bring to light human right abuses."

In January 2009 Memorial published a report on the detention, subsequent trial and conviction of 32 people, including two women and a 17-year-old boy, accused of having orchestrated and participated in violent protests in October 2008 in the town of Nookat in southern Kyrgyzstan. Scores of villagers had reportedly clashed with police when traditional celebrations of Eid-al-fitr were cancelled. The Kyrgyzstani authorities alleged that they were members of the banned Islamist party Hizb-ut-Tahrir and that they had wanted to overthrow the constitutional order, charges denied by the accused and their relatives.

The Memorial report, researched by Vitali Ponomarev in Kyrgyzstan in December 2008, cast serious doubts on the safety of the convictions of the 32 people and was critical of the official version of events. The report pointed to allegations of torture of the defendants in pre-trial detention, including of the women, in order to force confessions. The trial itself and the subsequent appeal hearing were described as falling far short of international fair trial standards.

"The authorities in Kyrgyzstan must initiate independent and impartial investigations into the events in Nookat," Nicola Duckworth said.

"Allowing Vitali Ponomarev and other human rights activists, to work undisturbed in Kyrgyzstan will be a step in the right direction."

The five-year entry ban and the subsequent deportation of Vitali Ponomarev is reminiscent of practices by Kyrgyzstan's neighbour Uzbekistan where the authorities have banned numerous critical individuals, human rights defenders, independent journalists and international organizations to prevent them from carrying out investigations into serious allegations of persistent human rights violations by security forces. In October 2008 authorities in Kyrgyzstan banned the representative of an international human rights organization for 10 years.

“The authorities of Kyrgyzstan must not follow the example of Uzbekistan, but should allow independent human rights activists, experts and journalists to carry out their activities in safety and to work without fear of harassment or intimidation,” Nicola Duckworth said.