

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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KYRGYZSTAN: RELEASE PRISONERS TO CURB THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION OF COVID-19

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Kyrgyzstan to take steps to curb the spread of the pandemic, reducing its prison populations and preventing over-crowding. The authorities should consider the release of individuals at particular risk from COVID-19, such as older people and those with underlying medical conditions, and others who may be eligible for early, temporary or conditional release. Amnesty International welcomes the decision of the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to release a certain number of prisoners on amnesty on 9 May 2020. Disappointingly an elderly human rights defender, prisoner of conscience **Azimjan Askarov** was not among those released at this time.

PROTECTION OF PRISONERS DURING THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

Prisoners should enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community, including when it comes to testing, prevention and treatment of COVID-19. Where a prison service has its own hospital facilities, they must be adequately staffed and equipped to provide prisoners referred to them with appropriate treatment and care; prisoners who require specialized treatment or surgery should be transferred to specialized institutions or to civil hospitals.¹

A basic protective measure recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is to maintain physical (“social”) distancing from others. The overcrowding and poor sanitation in many prisons in Kyrgyzstan make it impossible for detainees to take preventive steps against the disease, such as physical distancing and regular hand washing. Furthermore, access to adequate healthcare is a long-standing problem in Kyrgyzstan, where prisoners are often not provided with the same standard of health care as the rest of the population. The Kyrgyzstani authorities should take measures to reduce the prison population, and as part of this consider if certain groups of prisoners could be released on parole or granted early/conditional release or other alternative non-custodial measures. Efforts should be made to release, amongst others, older detainees and detainees with certain underlying medical conditions who are at particular risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19.

UNCONDITIONAL RELEASE OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

Furthermore, Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all the prisoners of conscience worldwide. Prisoners of conscience are individuals who have not committed any crime and have been prosecuted and imprisoned solely for attempting to exercise their right to freedom of expression and other rights. Yet they continue to be arbitrarily detained in conditions that are now becoming increasingly perilous due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their unjustified detention is putting them at heightened risk.

Azimjan Askarov is a prisoner of conscience. He has spent ten years in prison after being sentenced to life imprisonment in September 2010 for his purported role in the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. The charges against him were fabricated to prevent him from carrying out his human rights work and the investigation and his trial were marred by fair trial violations. At the same time, Azimjan Askarov’s credible allegations that he was tortured in pre-trial detention have never been properly investigated.

¹ See, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), UN Doc. A/RES/70/175, rule 27(1), undocs.org/A/RES/70/175

zimjan Askarov is 69 and his health has seriously deteriorated after years in prison and in the absence of adequate health care. He suffers from cardiac and respiratory problems which, in the context of the spread of COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan, put his life at increased risk.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to reduce the prison population to curb the risk of transmission of COVID-19, and to ensure that all prisoners are protected against torture and other ill-treatment and have access to adequate health care including for testing, prevention and treatment of COVID-19. The organization also renews its call on the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to take all necessary steps to ensure that Azimjan Askarov is released immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for defending human rights;