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KYRGYZSTAN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS PRISON SENTENCES FOR JOURNALISTS CHARGED WITH LIBEL

Amnesty International today condemned the sentencing of newspaper editor Zamira Sydykova and journalist Alexander Alyanchikov to 18-month prison terms at the end of a criminal trial for libel. This was the second such trial within a week.

"These people are prisoners of conscience, sentenced because of the wholly inappropriate use of criminal legislation," Amnesty International said. "How long before Kyrgyzstani authorities get the message that bringing criminal libel charges in what should clearly be civil cases is an attack on the human right to freedom of expression".

Zamira Sydykova and Alexander Alyanchikov, and two co-defendants who received fines, were charged in connection with articles allegedly libelling Dastan Sarugulov, president of the state-owned gold company Kyrgyzaltyn. The articles appeared in the controversial independent newspaper *Res Publika* between 1993 and 1996.

This is Zamira Sydykova's second criminal conviction for libel. In 1995 she received an 18-month suspended sentence and was banned from working as a journalist for the same period for libelling the President of Kyrgyzstan.

Amnesty International recognizes that anyone who believes they have been the victim of defamation has the right to seek redress through the courts. The organization takes no position on the legitimacy or otherwise of the complaint of libel in the case against Zamira Sydykova and Aleksander Alyanchikov.

However, Amnesty International argues that using criminal proceedings in libel cases implies that the defendant is responsible for an injury to society at large. Amnesty International disputes the fact that the alleged libel in this case constitutes any such injury to society. It believes that libel complaints such as this should be addressed in civil proceedings in which a complainant can seek redress for personal injury to their reputation.

This is the second such case to be concluded in Kyrgyzstan this week. On 21 May *Res Publika* journalist Yrysbek Omurzakov was ordered to be kept in detention pending further investigation of the criminal libel case against him, after a court failed to reach a verdict. Amnesty International regards him also as a prisoner of conscience.

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