

EXTERNAL

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@Abdumannob PULATOV

£Uzbekistan

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Abdumannob Pulatov, a leading human rights activist from the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan, was abducted on 8 December 1992 in Bishkek, the capital of the neighbouring republic of Kyrgyzstan, by officers of the Uzbekistan National Security Service. He is now being held in an investigation-isolation prison in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, and has been charged with "infringement upon the honour and dignity of the President" (Article 191-4 part 2 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code). Amnesty International considers Abdumannob Pulatov a prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Abdumannob Pulatov chairman of the independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and a member of the opposition Birlik (Unity) movement of Uzbekistan. He is by profession a lecturer in mathematics, but he also works as a freelance journalist writing on Uzbekistan for the independent Moscow newspaper Ekspress Khronika and for the newspaper Mustakil Khaftalik (Independent Weekly), which is produced in Moscow by the Birlik movement and distributed clandestinely in Uzbekistan. He has lived in Moscow since June 1992 as a virtual political exile because of fears of harassment by the authorities and possible prosecution in Uzbekistan. He was in Bishkek to organize an international human rights conference on 6-7 December, which was co-hosted by the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan. It was announced at the conference that Abdumannob Pulatov was to remain in Bishkek as director of a new Central Asian human rights information centre.

Shortly after midday on 8 December eight men forced Abdumannob Pulatov, his two bodyguards and Uktam Bekhmukhamedov, an activist from the ethnic Tadjik minority in Uzbekistan into an unmarked white van parked outside the "Dostuk" hotel, where a press conference had just been held to conclude the human rights conference. The abduction was witnessed by several journalists who had attended the press conference. A Kyrgyz police spokesman later stated that Abdumannob Pulatov's abductors were members of the Uzbekistan National Security Service. The van was reportedly intercepted by Kyrgyz police as it approached the Uzbekistan border, but was allowed to continue after the Uzbek security personnel presented a warrant for Abdumannob Pulatov's arrest.

On arrival in Tashkent the three others were released after questioning, but Abdumannob Pulatov was charged with "infringement upon the honour and dignity of the President". The charge apparently relates to the publication early in 1992 of a photograph in Mustakil Khaftalik which showed student demonstrators in Tashkent carrying a banner on which was painted a caricature of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov.

Amnesty International believes that article 191-4 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code places

unwarranted restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, and may be invoked to punish people for their political opposition to the authorities. Amnesty International believes that the arrest of Abdumannob Pulatov on this charge is a violation of his right to freedom of expression.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Opposition politicians and human rights activists are subject to frequent persecution and harassment in Uzbekistan. One other prisoner of conscience, Babur Shakirov, is currently in pre-trial detention on charges of calling for the overthrow of the state, because of his attempts to establish a peaceful parliamentary-style opposition forum. Probable prisoner of conscience Pulat Akhunov is currently on trial on assault charges which sources allege have been fabricated to punish him for his opposition activities. Short-term "administrative arrest" of up to 15 days has been used to punish people for organizing peaceful meetings and demonstrations. On at least seven occasions during 1992 leaders of the Birlik movement, including Abdumannob Pulatov's brother Abdurakhim Pulatov, have been victims of serious physical assault by unknown assailants.

On 4 December at least six opposition activists were detained by police in Uzbekistan to prevent them from attending the Bishkek human rights conference, while Uzbek delegates returning from the conference were detained by police in Tashkent and interrogated for up to 10 hours before being released.

Uzbekistan's parliament on 10 December banned the Birlik movement, two days after having approved a new constitution which endorsed a multi-party political system and respect for fundamental human rights.