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China: Uighur writer's death in prison would be bitter blow

The reported death of a celebrated Uighur writer in a Chinese prison, if confirmed, would be an indictment of freedom of expression, and expose harsh prison conditions in China, Amnesty International said today.

Although author Nurmemet Yasin's death was reported only a few days ago, he apparently died sometime in 2011 in Shaya prison in western China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

"Nurmemet Yasin should never have been imprisoned in the first place, and if confirmed, the death of this young writer in prison is a shameful indictment of the Chinese government's notion of justice," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Asia Pacific.

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese authorities to confirm or deny the reports of Yasin's death.

Yasin was imprisoned for "inciting splittism" on the basis of his story, 'Wild Pigeon'. The story is a first-person narrative of a young pigeon, the son of a pigeon king, who becomes trapped by humans and commits suicide rather than live in captivity.

"Now, finally, I can die free," the narrator says in the story. "I feel as if my soul is on fire – soaring and free."

Little is known about the writer's death, but he is believed to have been suffering ill-health while behind bars, and conditions in Shaya prison are known to be harsh. High profile dissident Gao Zhisheng, a human rights lawyer, is being held in the same prison.

Yasin was arrested in 2004 after the publication of 'Wild Pigeon' in a Kashgar literary journal, and was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment following an unfair trial.

He was one of the few prisoners in China visited by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture in 2005.

A prolific author and poet, Yasin was an honorary member of English, American and Independent Chinese PEN. He published three volumes of poetry: *First Love*, *Crying from the Heart* and *Come on, Children*, and his writing is included in Uighur-language school textbooks.

"The Chinese authorities should realise that consigning peaceful writers to a slow death in prison will never destroy their writing, or tame the urge to freedom that their writing inspires," said Baber.