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Ukraine must stop harassment of trade union activist

Amnesty International has urged the Ukraine authorities to stop the harassment of a trade union activist who remains in hiding after a court ordered him to undergo a forced psychiatric examination.

A court in Vinnytsya, south west Ukraine on 29 October granted the order for an examination after prosecutors argued that Andrei Bondarenko has an "excessive awareness of his own and others' rights and [an] his uncontrollable readiness to defend these rights in unrealistic ways."

Andrei Bondarenko has no record of mental illness and has already undergone three psychiatric examinations to prove his sanity. The most recent examination took place in October.

The court ruling against Andrei Bondarenko comes in the wake of a number of recent cases in which activists have been assaulted and harassed in the last few months.

"There is a very real concern that Andrei Bondarenko will be subjected to a forced psychiatric examination because of his legitimate trade union and human rights activities," said Heather McGill Amnesty International's expert on Ukraine.

"Any examination should be conducted outside of the Vinnytsya region by an officially recognized psychiatrist to ensure impartiality. Andrei Bondarenko should not be subjected to any treatment until he has exhausted all legal channels."

Andrei Bondarenko has campaigned for the rights of employees in Vinnytsya region since 2006. His work has often exposed the unlawful and irresponsible behaviour of local officials.

In August 2010 he founded an NGO called Movement for a Corruption Free Vinnytsya Region Prosecutor's Office.

Andrei Bondarenko also appears to have angered the authorities with his work in defence of the rights of sugar factory workers. These seasonal workers are employed for only a few months a year after the sugar beet harvest and are frequently not paid.

Many of these factories are officially owned by shadow companies, although in fact the real owners are influential local people many of them high up in the local administration.

Andrei Bondarenko started a campaign of taking the shadow companies to court to demand payment of wages. According to one prosecutor's statement, he started 80 such cases in 2008 alone.

The trade unionist was not present at his trial on Friday and was represented by two civil defenders and a lawyer, who was ordered out of the court by a panel of judges.

The recent harassment of other activists points to a worsening climate for human rights in the Ukraine.

On 15 October, police in Vinnytsya searched the house and office of Dmytro Groysman, the chair of Vinnytsya Human Rights Group, which supports asylum-seekers and campaigns against torture.

Police questioned staff about their work, and confiscated over 300 items, including UNHCR files, computer discs, memory sticks and a laptop.

Andrei Fedosov, the chair of a mental disability rights organization, Uzer, was assaulted by unknown men in May, after receiving threatening phone calls in April. Police took no action. In July he was detained for a day in relation to a crime allegedly committed 10 years ago when he was 15 years old.

"All these activists appear to have been targeted because of their legitimate work. The Ukrainian authorities must ensure that human rights defenders can carry out their activities unhindered and protect them against any violence, threats and retaliation," said Heather McGill.