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EXTERNAL

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Abdunabi ABDIYEV (Абдунаби АБДИЕВ)

Arif ABDIYEV (Ариф АБДИЕВ)

Uzbekistan

Amnesty International is concerned that brothers Abdunabi and Arif Abdiyev, members of the outlawed opposition party Erk (Freedom), are being held in police custody in Uzbekistan. It is not clear what charges have been brought against them, but Amnesty International is concerned by reports that they were arrested for possession of copies of the banned Erk party newspaper. Amnesty International believes that these men may be prisoners of conscience, arrested solely for their non-violent opposition political activities. The organization is seeking further information about the charges against Abdunabi and Arif Abdiyev.

Abdunabi Abdiyev is a correspondent of the Erk newspaper. He and his brother Arif were arrested on 20 April 1994 in Bakhoriston district, Kashkadarya region, southern Uzbekistan. Unofficial sources report that they were subsequently transferred to Tashkent, the capital, where they are being held in the remand cells of the directorate of internal affairs. No further details are currently available about the circumstances of their arrest or detention.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ERK POLITICAL PARTY

The Freedom Democratic Party - Erk - was founded in April 1990 following a split in 1989 from the opposition Birlik movement. It was officially registered as Uzbekistan's first opposition political party in September 1991 (the ruling party in Uzbekistan is the People's Democratic Party, the former Communist Party), and party chairman Muhammad Salih contested Uzbekistan's presidential election in December 1991. The party claims 54,000 registered members.

During 1992 Erk took an increasingly radical opposition stance in the face of harassment from the authorities. Muhammad Salih resigned his parliamentary seat in July in protest at not being allowed to address the Supreme Soviet, Uzbekistan's parliament. In August almost all of the party funds were sequestered by the authorities from the party's bank account under the pretext of a tax inspection. Moves began to evict the party from its offices in Tashkent, the capital. Since October 1993 the party has been effectively banned after it did not meet the terms of a decree issued in March requiring all political organizations to re-register by 1 October.

A number of Erk members, especially senior party figures, have been targeted for arrest or other persecution by the authorities. Muhammad Salih has gone into exile after a criminal case was initiated against him in April 1993 in connection with formation of an opposition discussion forum called Milli Mejlis ("National Council"). In early October 1993 Samat Muratov, who had been elected first secretary of Erk at the party's fourth congress at the end

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of the previous month, was seized from a street in the town of Karshi, the capital of Kashkadarya region, by suspected government agents and driven to the town rubbish dump, where he was beaten unconscious.

The official clampdown against Erk has intensified in 1994. In late February and early March at least 10 leading Erk activists were held for questioning following police raids on their homes in Tashkent, Samarkand, Karshi and other locations. Some of those detained were released shortly afterwards, but others remained in detention facing criminal charges. Among them were Mamadali Makhmudov, a well-known writer, who was arrested at the beginning of March at his home in Tashkent. Initial reports suggested that a pistol had been found at his home during a police search, and that this had allegedly been planted on him by police, but sources subsequently suggested that he was being investigated for embezzlement. Sources alleged that the authorities were trying to fabricate a criminal charge against Mamadali Makhmudov to punish him for his association with Muhammad Salih. Amnesty International sought information from the authorities about the charge against Mamadali Makhmudov.

Also arrested in March were Otanazar Aripov, a secretary of the Erk central committee, and Erk member Salavat Umurzakov. They had been among six people brought to trial in July 1993 in connection with the formation of the Milli Mejlis and convicted the following month of "conspiracy with the aim of seizing power". Salavat Umurzakov and Otanazar Aripov were tried again separately in March and April and ordered to begin serving the previously-suspended prison sentences of, respectively, three and five years passed on them in August 1993. They were considered to have violated a condition under which their sentences had been suspended by continuing their active involvement in Erk (Freedom). Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.