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Uzbekistan: Journalist Igor Rotar detained at Tashkent airport

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Igor Rotar, a correspondent for several Western media outlets including Forum 18, a web-based news service on religious freedom issues.

The journalist was detained by the Immigration Service and Border Guards when he arrived at Tashkent Airport on a flight from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 11 August at 10.25am local time. Igor Rotar continues to be held at the airport by the Uzbekistani authorities.

There are strong indications Igor Rotar was targeted to prevent him from researching religious freedom issues in Uzbekistan.

“Igor Rotar’s detention is part of a wave of intimidation and harassment of journalists and human rights defenders by the Uzbekistani authorities that escalated following the events in Andizhan in May this year,” said Amnesty International today.

Reportedly, his detention took place on the orders of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan. However, when approached by a Western Embassy, the Uzbekistani authorities reportedly denied ever having heard of Igor Rotar, let alone holding him at the airport.

Igor Rotar is a Russian citizen. He has travelled to Uzbekistan frequently over many years, including to obtain information for Forum 18 news stories covering religious freedom issues concerning a wide range of religious groups -- including Muslims, Christians, Hare Krishna and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Background

Amnesty International is concerned that recent unrest in Uzbekistan, in particular the events in Andizhan in May 2005, have been used by the authorities to justify a further clampdown on dissent and freedom of expression, association and assembly in the name of “national security” and the “war on terror”.

Since the Andizhan uprising, a number of journalists and human rights defenders have been targeted and harassed by the authorities. Freedom of expression is under threat in Uzbekistan and journalists and human rights activists have been prevented from doing their job and disseminating information. They have been subjected to physical assaults, beatings, threats, arbitrary arrests and being forcibly confined to their houses, with phone lines being cut off. Amnesty International is concerned that they have been subjected to abuse and harassment because of their human rights activities.

According to information available to Amnesty International, during the night of 12-13 May, a group of unidentified armed men broke into the jail of the city of Andizhan, reportedly freeing hundreds of prisoners, and later taking hostages and occupying a local government building. Throughout the day

thousands of people gathered in a city square; many spoke out to demand justice and an end to poverty. There were sporadic incidents of security forces firing indiscriminately into the crowds, killing and wounding demonstrators, most of whom were unarmed. In the early evening, security forces were reported to have surrounded the crowd of thousands of protestors on the city's main square, hemming them in with buses, armed personnel carriers and other barriers. According to witnesses, hundreds of people -- men, women and children -- were killed when government troops opened fire on the crowd in the square and as they fled. Hundreds left the country and sought international protection in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Amnesty International deplored the government's refusal to carry out an independent, international investigation into the May events in Andizhan, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice.