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Uzbekistan: Authorities stop death penalty conference

The authorities in Uzbekistan have prevented the conference "The death penalty: analysis, trends and reality" from taking place in Tashkent.

An Amnesty International representative who arrived in Tashkent today to attend the conference said: "This step shows yet again how freedom of expression is curtailed in Uzbekistan. It also highlights the authorities' policy to prevent any public discussion of the death penalty in the country."

The non-governmental group Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture organized the conference to initiate a public debate about the death penalty and to create a platform for dialogue with the authorities. The organization had invited representatives of the authorities of Uzbekistan, foreign diplomats, representatives of intergovernmental organizations as well as local and international human rights activists to speak at the conference.

The authorities reportedly said the conference could not be held as it was organized by an unregistered organization. Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture, as is the practice with many other human rights groups in Uzbekistan, has to date been denied registration by the authorities.

Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture already faced obstacles when preparing the conference. "It was almost impossible to get the latest bulletin of our group and Amnesty International's recent report '*Justice only in heaven*' the death penalty in Uzbekistan, printed. Not all printing houses wanted to take that risk", said Tamara Chikunova, director of Mothers against the Death Penalty.

Background

Freedom of expression is severely curtailed in Uzbekistan and human rights defenders have frequently been targets of harassment, intimidation and imprisonment. Pressure has been put on human rights defenders and family members struggling to save the lives of death row prisoners, to desist from their activities. Representatives of Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture have received death threats and were reportedly told by officers of the Secret Services, following their presentations at this year's annual meeting of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in May, that their organization was "blacklisted" and that the Secret Services were awaiting orders to "eliminate the organization".

In Uzbekistan scores of people are executed after unfair trials. Many of them were tortured and corruption is an integral part of the investigation, trial and appeal proceedings in such cases. The clemency process, the date of the execution and the location of the grave are shrouded in secrecy, compounding the punishment inflicted not only on the prisoner, but also on their families.

**For a copy of Amnesty International's report: "*Justice only in heaven*" - the death penalty in Uzbekistan and of its summary entitled *Uzbekistan: Unfair trials and secret executions* please go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur620112003> and
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur620122003> respectively.**

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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