

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UZBEKISTAN: APPEAL CASE

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Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov – activist punished for human rights activities

Human rights defender and independent journalist Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov has been in police custody in the city of Nukus in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan of Uzbekistan since his detention at the beginning of June 2008 on a questionable charge of possessing illegal drugs. Amnesty International considers Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for carrying out his human rights activities and exercising his right to freedom of expression, and calls for him to be released from detention immediately and unconditionally.



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Fifty-eight-year old Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov is the chairperson for Karakalpakstan of the registered non-governmental human rights organization Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Individual (Komitet po Zashchite Prav Lichnosti) and one of the few independent journalists left in the country writing on the situation in Karakalpakstan for the independent Germany-based website uznews.net. He was detained on 7 June 2008 just days before an international media seminar in the capital Tashkent on suspicion of illegal possession of narcotics. Traffic police who stopped his car reportedly for a routine inspection claimed to have found small bags with opium and marijuana hidden in the boot of the car. According to Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov's brother the journalist had taken his car to a garage some days before his detention. Staff at the garage had reported that police had visited the premises and had expressed an interest in the journalist's car. When Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov collected his car on 7 June and drove away from the garage he was stopped at a

nearby checkpoint by a traffic police officer with a sniffer dog. The sniffer dog, it is claimed, did not react to the car, nor did a second sniffer dog brought to the scene. It was only when a team of traffic police officers started thoroughly inspecting the car that the illegal drugs were found. The journalist was detained and charged with illegal possession of narcotics without intent to sell under Article 276 point two of the Uzbekistani Criminal Code. Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov has categorically denied ever being in possession of narcotics or ever having used illegal substances. His brother, who is also acting as his legal representative, and supporters have claimed that the narcotics were either placed in the boot of the car by a third party while the car was being serviced at the local garage or were planted by the police during the search of the car. They allege that the charges were fabricated in order to punish Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov for his human rights and journalistic activities. According to his brother the police conducted a search of Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov's home and office and confiscated his computer and technical equipment as well as compact discs, books and papers and written materials. They also reportedly questioned the journalist about a biography in English of the leader of the banned Erk opposition party which they found among his possessions. Medical tests ordered by the police investigating his arrest were reported to have confirmed that Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov was not a user of narcotics. Examination of the journalist's electronic computer and hard copy files have reportedly not yielded any evidence of illegal or criminal activities or links. Nevertheless, Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov remains in

detention. An appeal against his detention was rejected by the Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan on 16 June. A judge in Nukus had sanctioned his arrest on 10 June, three days after his initial detention. Requests by Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov's legal representative for forensic examinations to be carried out of the bag which contained the narcotics and of the car in which they were found, specifically with a view to identifying any fingerprints, have reportedly been refused. Amnesty International considers Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov a prisoner of conscience who should be released promptly and unconditionally.

Background

In recent months the situation in Uzbekistan for human rights defenders and independent journalists has deteriorated. This is in spite of assertions by the authorities that freedom of expression and association are not restricted, and that they have taken measures to ensure that independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society activists can function freely in the country. However, under a 2007 Presidential Amnesty only some of the imprisoned human rights defenders were released in February 2008, and moreover their release was not unconditional. Human rights defender Mutabar Tadzhibaeva, who was released in June 2008 on humanitarian grounds because of her medical condition, was also not released unconditionally. At least a dozen human rights defenders remain in prison in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions, having been convicted to long prison terms after unfair trials. They have limited access to relatives and legal representatives, and there are reports that they have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Two members of an independent unregistered NGO, the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, fled Uzbekistan in April 2008 after being threatened with arrest for their human rights activities. An independent political analyst also had to seek asylum abroad after the arrest in July of a political opposition activist he had been associated with. Other human rights activists and journalists, who have not been forced into exile, are routinely monitored by uniformed or plain-clothes law enforcement officers; they are called in for questioning at their local police stations, placed under house arrest or otherwise prevented from attending meetings with foreign diplomats and delegations, or taking part in peaceful demonstrations. Human rights defenders and journalists have reported being beaten and detained by law enforcement officers, or beaten by people suspected of working for the security services. Relatives also report being threatened and harassed by security forces; some of them have been detained and jailed in order to put pressure on the human rights defenders. There are regular television programmes and articles in the national press denouncing independent journalists, and the international networks they work for, and calling them traitors.

Likewise, pressure on international media and NGOs continues despite assertions to the contrary by the authorities. In May 2008 the authorities refused to register the work permit of the country director of Human Rights Watch and in July banned him from Uzbekistan, thereby effectively preventing this international NGO from continuing its operations in Uzbekistan. In June 2008 a TV station with wide coverage across the territory of Uzbekistan, including the capital Tashkent, retransmitted a broadcast by a local TV station denouncing Uzbekistani staff of the US-congress funded international media organization Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) as traitors to their country. The programme also gave personal details, including names and addresses and the schools that children of local correspondents attended. The broadcast happened just days after an international seminar on media freedom in Tashkent, organised by the Uzbekistani authorities, at which the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Miklosz Hazrati, was given assurances that much needed reform was under way. It was the first time the OSCE Representative had been formally invited to Uzbekistan. Miklosz Hazrati expressed concern at the intimidation of RFE/RL correspondents and also at the detention Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov.

Letter-writing recommendations:

Please send courteous letters in Uzbek, Russian, English, or your own language stating the following:

- expressing concern that the criminal charge against Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov was politically motivated and that the drugs were planted on him;
- stating that Amnesty International considers Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for carrying out his human rights work and lawfully exercising his right to freedom of expression, and calling for his immediate release;
- urging the authorities to ensure that everyone can peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression in conformity with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Uzbekistan is a State Party;
- reminding the authorities of the right of human rights defenders to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals, as set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

APPEALS TO: (Please note that it can be difficult getting through to fax numbers in Uzbekistan. If a voice answers, repeat "fax" until you hear the signal; otherwise leave your fax machine on auto-redial if possible. Fax machines may be switched off outside office hours – 5 hours ahead of GMT):

Minister of Internal Affairs Bahodir MATLIUBOV
Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del RU; ul. Junus Rajabiy 1; Tashkent 700029; UZBEKISTAN
Fax: + 998 71 233 89 34; Email: mvd@mvd.uz, info@mvd.uz, secretariat@mvd.uz
Salutation: Dear Minister Matliubov

Deputy Prosecutor General, Alisher SHARAFUTDINOV
Prokuratura Respubliki Uzbekistan; ul. Gulyamova 66; Tashkent 700047; UZBEKISTAN
Fax: + 998 71 233 39 17/ 133 73 68; Email: prokuratura@lawyer.com
Salutation: Dear Mr Sharafutdinov

COPIES TO:

Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir NOROV
Ministerstvo inostrannykh del RU; pl. Mustakillik, 5; Tashkent 700029; UZBEKISTAN
Fax: + 998 71 139 15 17

Head of the Nukus City Department of Internal Affairs (police)
Glave GOVD, Gorodskoi Otdel Vnutrennikh Del, ul. Biruni, g. Nukus, AR Karakalpakstan,
UZBEKISTAN

and to diplomatic representatives of Uzbekistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND ANY REPLIES FROM THE UZBEKISTAN AUTHORITIES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (Eurasia Research and Campaign Team, Amnesty International, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom)