

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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AI Index: EUR 62/021/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 222
9 September 2004

Uzbekistan: Anti-death penalty speakers' tour Tamara Chikunova - profile

Tamara Chikunova is the founder and Chair of the non-governmental organization "Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture", based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

In 1999, Tamara's son, Dmitry Chikunov, was accused of murder and sentenced to death. On 11 July 2000, Tamara went to Tashkent Prison for an authorized visit with her son. She was told by prison guards that she could not see him but should come back the next day. When she returned on 12 July she was told that Dmitry had been executed two days earlier. He was 28 years old.

Tamara Chikunova has never been told where her son was buried. She has since visited many former cemeteries in and around Tashkent as there is a widespread belief that death row prisoners are buried there. *"It is one of the worst things for me, that I do not know where Dmitry is buried. If I knew I would at least have a place where I can go with my grief and where I can talk to him."*

To honour her son's memory and to work towards a vision where nobody has to suffer what she and her son had to go through Tamara Chikunova founded the human rights organization "Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture". Her organization has worked on dozens of death penalty cases and helped to save the lives of many young men sentenced to death, for example, by assisting family members of death row prisoners to submit complaints to the relevant United Nations bodies. For the past four years Tamara has also cooperated consistently and reliably with Amnesty International in campaigning against the death penalty in Uzbekistan.

In December 2003, Tamara was the driving force behind the organization of an international conference to be held in Tashkent, aimed at initiating a public debate about the death penalty and creating a platform for dialogue with the authorities. The conference was blocked by these same authorities only hours before it was due to begin. In May 2003 Tamara addressed the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development at a meeting held in Tashkent; in July 2004 she travelled to Rome to receive a *Colombo d'Oro*, awarded by the Italian organization *Archivio Disarmo* to women who have distinguished themselves for their efforts in the cause of human rights and peace.

Despite regular threats and harassment from the authorities intent on stopping the work of "Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture", Tamara and the other members of the organization remain committed to optimizing their campaigning and lobbying approaches. This initiative is extremely important and significant in a country where human rights violations remain widespread.

The case of Dmitry Chikunov

Dmitry Chikunov was convicted of involvement in the premeditated, aggravated murder of two men and

sentenced to death on 11 November 1999 by Tashkent Regional Court. The Supreme Court of Uzbekistan turned down his appeal against his death sentence on 24 January 2000. He was executed in secret less than six months later on 10 July 2000.

There were strong indications that Dmitry had been tortured to force him to "confess". While in pre-trial detention he told his mother: *"(At the police station officers) handcuffed my hands behind my back. All of them then held me by the shoulders and legs and started to swing me up and down, finally throwing me up at the ceiling... I landed on the ground on my back, and don't remember what happened next because of the pain. I couldn't speak - as though I was paralyzed. They did it four times..."*

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