

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER UNDER HOUSE ARREST

Human rights defender **Serikzhan Bilash** has been under house arrest since 10 March. He is the leader of the human rights organisation **Atajurt**, which exposes human rights violations against ethnic Kazakhs in China. **Serikzhan Bilash** is facing charges under Article 174 of the Criminal Code in an apparent move by the authorities to intimidate and harass him simply for defending human rights. He risks a maximum prison sentence of seven years. He is a prisoner of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Prosecutor General
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Dear Prosecutor General,

Human rights defender **Serikzhan Bilash** has been arbitrarily detained since 10 March because of his human rights work on behalf of ethnic Kazakhs in the Xinjian Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China.

He was detained in Almaty on 10 March and transferred that night to Nur-Sultan where a court placed him under house arrest at the house of an acquaintance in Nur-Sultan. He was not given access to a lawyer immediately, and it is not clear on what grounds he was transferred to Nur-Sultan as the alleged offence took place in Almaty. He was given access to a lawyer of his choice the day following his arrest. **Serikzhan Bilash** has been accused under Article 174 of the Criminal Code (incitement of "discord" on social, national, racial, clan or religious grounds or on grounds of birth) a vaguely worded article which has been used to silence views that are perceived to be critical of the authorities.

The charges against him are reportedly based on remarks that he made at a meeting with members of the Uighur community in Kazakhstan in early February 2019 at which he stated that "Jihad today is not taking up a gun and fighting in Syria. Jihad is information and propaganda". It would appear that the charges against him are an attempt to prevent him from drawing attention to human rights violations in China, an important trade partner for Kazakhstan.

I urge you to release Serikzhan Bilash immediately and unconditionally as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. I also urge you to ensure that he is not subjected to any form of torture and other ill-treatment including psychological pressure.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Serikzhan Bilash, an ethnic Kazakh, moved to Kazakhstan from China in the early 2000s and has Kazakh citizenship. He set up the NGO Atajurt Eriktileri (Atajurt) in 2017 to assist the relatives of ethnic Kazakhs detained in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). His organization has come under pressure from the Kazakh authorities. In February he was ordered to pay a fine of \$700, for acting in the name of an unregistered organization, despite having tried to register his organization without success. More recently he reported that he was under surveillance and shortly before his arrest in March he moved into a hotel to protect his family.

Serikzhan Bilash has worked closely with Amnesty International researchers in exposing human rights violations in XUAR. He contributed to an Amnesty International report published in September 2018 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/9113/2018/en/>). The report documents disturbing reports of intrusive surveillance, arbitrary detention and forced indoctrination targeting Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in China's XUAR.

The Kazakh government which is heavily dependent on financial assistance and loans from China has been reluctant to raise the issue of human rights violations against Kazakhs living in XUAR. However, the issue has become increasingly prominent. In April 2018, Sayragul Autybai fled China and sought asylum in Kazakhstan. She had worked as an instructor in re-education camps in China and testified about the situation in the camps. She was arrested for illegally crossing the border, and spent several months fearing deportation to China before being released on bail in August. In October her application for asylum was turned down, and the hearing on her appeal is ongoing. In March 2019, China officially thanked Kazakhstan for supporting the "deradicalization programme" in XUAR.

Amnesty International has reported on violations of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Kazakhstan. Article 174 of the Criminal Code is a vaguely defined article which has been used to stifle any form of dissent. In 2018, after the opposition movement, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, was declared "extremist" dozens of people were questioned and many were prosecuted for their alleged support for Democratic Choice on social media. In November 2016, Maks Bokaev and Talgat Ayan were each sentenced to 5 years in prison under Article 174 of the new Criminal Code, and other charges, for their involvement in the organization of peaceful demonstrations and their posts on social media against proposed changes to the Land Code. Talgat Ayan's sentence was commuted on 12 April 2018, and he was released under conditions, however Maks Bokaev, a prisoner of conscience, remains in prison despite his worsening health condition.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Kazakh, Russian, English.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 22 July 2019
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Serikzhan Bilash (he/him)