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Ethnic Uzbek activist jailed for life on fabricated charges

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of an ethnic Uzbek human rights activist convicted of involvement in the murder of a policeman during the June violence in Kyrgyzstan.

Azimzhan Askarov, director of the human rights organization Vozdukh (Air), was sentenced today to life imprisonment and the confiscation of his property after an unfair trial by the Nookan district court in southern Kyrgyzstan.

He was also convicted on charges of “attempting to participate in hostage taking”, “storage of ammunition”, “storage of extremist literature”, “inciting ethnic hatred” and “organizing mass disorder.”

“The charges against Azimzhan Askarov were fabricated to target him for his legitimate work as human rights defender and he must be released immediately,” said Andrea Huber, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

The activist had filmed and photographed killings and arson attacks on mostly Uzbek homes, allegedly capturing the involvement of security forces in the June violence in Bazar-Korgan, before being detained by police on 15 June.

Six men and one woman were tried alongside him on a range of charges, from involvement in the murder to “organizing mass disorder” in Bazar-Korgan, where the police officer was killed on 13 June by a crowd that had staged a roadblock on a highway leading into the southern city.

Four of them were also sentenced to life imprisonment and the confiscation of property; three were sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine to 20 years.

Azimzhan Askarov and three of the other defendants appeared at the 6 September hearing with visible bruises on their faces which had not been visible at a previous hearing, suggesting they had been beaten while in custody.

Human rights monitors also noted other irregularities during the trial. In breach of fair trial procedure, Azimzhan Askarov’s lawyer was reportedly denied a request to meet with him, while others present in the court, mainly police and relatives of the murdered police officer, were allowed to address questions to the defendants at random. Relatives of the murdered officer had previously assaulted the lawyers in the courtroom.

“The trial against Azimzhan Askarov was blatantly unfair. Any appeal against the verdict must be heard outside of southern Kyrgyzstan to ensure his safety and that of his lawyers,” Andrea Huber said.

Around 400,000 people reportedly fled their homes after clashes between rival Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth gangs rapidly escalated into mass violence, reportedly leaving hundreds of people dead and thousands

injured. About 75,000 remain homeless and in need of shelter.

Amnesty International has called for an independent investigation into the June violence, including the killing of the police officer, to ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice.