

**Open Letter to the Belgian EU Presidency: Action Needed to Ensure
Protection of Endangered Kyrgyz Human Rights Defenders**

To: Michel Tilemans, Director of the Directorate for Human Rights, Multilateral Relations and Humanitarian Action of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Kingdom of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium

Cc: Tolekan Ismailova, Director, Human Rights Center “Citizens against Corruption”, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; and Aziza Abdirasulova, Director, Public Foundation “Kylm Shamy”, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Brussels, 6 July 2010

Dear Mr. Tilemans,

I am writing to you on behalf of the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) to draw your attention to the situation of Kyrgyz human rights defender Tolekan Ismailova, head of the Human Rights Center “Citizens against Corruption”, and her colleague Aziza Abdirasulova, head of the Public Foundation “Kylm Shamy”. We are concerned about the safety and well-being of these two women, who have been subjected to various forms of intimidation and a possible attempt at an arranged car crash because of their efforts to document and report on human rights violations related to the recent violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. We ask you, in your capacity as representative of the Belgian EU Presidency, to initiate action to ensure their protection.

Ismailova and Abdirasulova have been investigating and assisting victims of human rights violations in the Osh region in southern Kyrgyzstan after mass violence broke out there in mid-June. They have helped expose a range of serious human rights violations, which have largely targeted ethnic Uzbeks and in some cases apparently have been perpetrated with the involvement of local security forces. Because of this work, they have been intimidated and threatened. According to Ismailova,¹ they have been approached by local politicians who have expressed dissatisfaction with their work, received threatening calls from anonymous people, and been denounced on internet forums and in the street. They have been told they are not “good Kyrgyz” and that they are “not welcome” in the south because they “defend the rights of Uzbeks”. The mayor of the city of Osh has harshly reproached Ismailova for giving interviews to media about “the genocide of Uzbeks”.

On 27 June 2010, Ismailova and Abdirasulova escaped what they believe was an attempt to cause their car to crash. When they were traveling by car from the village of Papan to the city of Osh together with Oksana Chelysheva, a Russian human rights defender currently living in Finland, and Ales Beljatskij, a Belarusian human rights defender working for the International Federation for Human Rights in France, the car nearly went off the road as the rear wheels suddenly came loose. The driver managed to stop the car and temporarily fix the wheels. However, as they continued the trip, one of the wheels fell off and they had to call for help to get back to Osh. A mechanic that inspected the car later confirmed that the bolts of the rear wheels appeared to have been deliberately tempered with.

The following day, during an informal meeting with staff members of “Citizens against Corruption”, a well-known opposition politician spoke about an alleged plot to kill Ismailova because of her human rights activities.

That same day, 28 June 2010, Ismailova and Abdirasulova were also called to the Osh Regional Prosecutor’s Office. They thought that they were invited to discuss a request of theirs to visit a particular detention facility, but it turned out that they were summoned as witnesses in the investigation of a criminal case on the “organization of mass orders and killings”. The two women were interrogated for more than three hours, primarily with regard to information about a special police operation that had been published by an online resource citing them as sources (although they had not actually provided any information for the piece). Their interrogation was apparently aimed at putting pressure on them because of their work in the region.

The interrogation of Ismailova and Abdirasulova is particularly worrisome in light of recent developments surrounding another Kyrgyz human rights defender, Azimham Askarov. Askarov, who had filmed and photographed violence and abuses taking place in Bazar Korgan in the Jalal-Abad region in southern Kyrgyzstan, was detained on 15 June 2010 and subsequently charged with “organizing mass disorders” and “inciting inter-ethnic hatred”. While in detention, he has reportedly been denied access to a lawyer of his own choice and subjected to beatings.ⁱⁱ

Ismailova has now left Kyrgyzstan together with her children because of imminent safety concerns, while Abdirasulova remains in the country.

With particular reference to the EU guidelines on human rights defenders, which spell out the commitment of the EU to contribute to ensuring protection and respect for the rights of human rights defenders in third countries, we urge the Belgian EU Presidency, in coordination with other relevant EU actors to:

- raise and express concern about the cases of Tolekan Ismailova, Aziza Abdirasulova and Azimham Askarov in contacts with the Kyrgyz interim authorities;
- call on the Kyrgyz interim authorities, as part of a broader effort to guarantee security and respect for human rights in southern Kyrgyzstan, to take prompt and

effective measures to ensure that human rights defenders who are working to investigate and document abuses related to the recent violence can carry out their important work safely and without intimidation, harassment or retaliatory acts;

- offer emergency protection and assistance to Tolekan Ismailova outside of Kyrgyzstan until it can be deemed safe for her to return to her country, and provide support and assistance to Aziza Abdirasulova in accordance with her current needs for protection; and
- request the immediately release of Azimham Askarov, as well as a prompt and independent investigation into the allegations of torture against him.

We thank you for your attention to the concerns raised in this letter. We would be happy to provide you with additional information if you so wish.

Sincerely,



Brigitte Dufour
IPHR Director, Brussels, Belgium

ⁱ Information obtained by the IPHR from Tolekan Ismailova on 5 and 6 July 2010.

ⁱⁱ For more information, see Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan: Ensure Safety, Due Process for Detained Activist," 23 June 2010, at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/06/23/kyrgyzstan-ensure-safety-due-process-detained-activist>; Amnesty International, "Kyrgyzstan: Human Rights Defender Beaten in Custody: Azimzhan Askarov," 25 June 2010, at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR58/005/2010/en>.