

Human Rights Day: Central Asian Human Rights Defenders Continue to Face Serious Challenges

Brussels, 10 December 2010. Today is **Human Rights Day**, which this year is celebrated with the particular aim of recognizing and acclaiming the achievements of the world's human rights defenders, many of whom work at great personal risk. The International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) would like to use this occasion to highlight the situation of human rights defenders in Central Asia, who face many and serious challenges in their work.

Because of their efforts to stand up to injustice, discrimination and abuse, Central Asian human rights defenders are intimidated, threatened, denounced, accused of slander, prosecuted on politically motivated charges, imprisoned after unfair trials and harassed and punished in other ways. The following are only a few examples of challenges encountered by human rights activists from this region in recent months:

Human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan have been intimidated, harassed, publicly condemned and physically attacked because of their efforts to investigate and ensure true accountability for the inter-ethnic violence that rocked the country this summer. Human rights defenders providing legal assistance to ethnic Uzbeks accused of participating in the violence have faced **threats and pressure**. Azimzhan Askarov, a defender of Uzbek ethnicity who documented looting, arson and violent attacks during the peak of the inter-ethnic clashes, was subsequently accused of **participating in riots** where a police officer of Kyrgyz ethnicity was killed. In November, an appeal court upheld a life sentence against Askarov following an unfair trial. As reported by **Citizens against Corruption**, an IPHR partner organization that monitored the trial, the process violated the principles of equality of arms and presumption of innocence and deprived Askarov and the other defendants of the opportunity to mount an effective defense. During the trial, relatives of the dead policeman repeatedly interfered in the process and shouted insults and threats against the defendants and their lawyers and even physically attacked them. Askarov is also believed to have been tortured during interrogations. Around the time of the appeal hearing, his **health seriously deteriorated** and there are concerns that he may not have received adequate treatment.

Security services in Turkmenistan keep a close watch on individuals who are believed to be engaged in any kind of human rights related activities and single them out for interrogation, prohibition on traveling abroad and other punitive measures. Also Turkmen human rights defenders who live in exile are in the line of danger. In October, Farid Tukhbatullin, who is the head of a Vienna-based NGO that publishes regular and critical reports on human rights developments in Turkmenistan, **received warnings** from credible sources that Turkmen security services are planning an attack on his life. According to these sources, the plan is to "eliminate" him in a way that would not give rise to suspicion about foul play, e.g. by making it look like an accident or a sudden heart attack. As a result of the threats, Tukhbatullin was afforded

protection by Austrian police, but he nevertheless remains at risk. Because of imminent security concerns, as well as problems with obtaining visas, Tukhbatullin and other Turkmen exile activists were not able to participate in a parallel NGO conference held in Astana on the eve of the 1-2 December OSCE summit in this city. Kazakh officials hinted that their **security could not be guaranteed** if they were to participate in the conference. Earlier the Turkmen authorities had threatened to boycott the summit should Turkmen civil society activists be allowed to be present. In an **open letter**, Tukhbatullin and colleagues deplored these developments and called on the international community to demonstrate greater solidarity and a more principled and uncompromising position when dealing with the Turkmen authorities on human rights.

In Uzbekistan, the **release** in early December of a human rights defender imprisoned on politically motivated charges was a cause for celebration. However, a dozen other human rights defenders continue to serve prison sentences after being convicted on trumped-up charges. There are also cases where civil defamation cases appear to have been exploited to punish human rights activists. In late September 2010, Surat Ikramov, a prominent Tashkent-based human rights defender with whom the IPHR has cooperated on several publications (see **here** for a recent example), was **convicted of defamation**. The case concerned a statement that his NGO issued in 2007 about the death of a famous Uzbek singer. This statement conveyed allegations of the singer's family that her death was presented as a suicide in a police cover-up to protect a high-ranking police official, who was her lover. The libel suit was filed by the former nanny of the singer and her husband. However, Ikramov believes that third parties in reality were behind the unfounded suit and tried to use it as a means to, on the one hand, distract attention from the true circumstances of the singer's death and, on the other hand, put pressure on him for his human rights work. While the plaintiffs had demanded damages in the amount of 10 million soms (about 5.000 euro), the court confined itself to ordering Ikramov to pay 100.000 soms (some 50 EUR), as well as to publish a retraction.

In addition to the human rights defenders mentioned above, there are many other defenders in Central Asia – men and women, known and unknown – whose human rights engagement remains an ongoing struggle because of the various challenges they face. We applaud the courageous and tireless efforts of these human rights defenders, and remind the Central Asian governments of their obligation to **respect the rights** of all individuals who are involved in peaceful and legitimate activities to promote human rights, including by scrutinizing and criticizing existing government policies. We also call on the international community to continue to support Central Asian human rights defenders in their difficult campaigns for human rights change, speak up against harassment and intimidation targeting them and request concrete and effective measures to ensure a safer and more enabling environment for them to operate in.

See also:

Joint statement by IPHR and partners on human rights defenders in Central Asia
Outcome document of Parallel NGO Conference, Astana (which contains a section on human rights defenders)

For more publications on human rights issues in Central Asia, see the **IPHR website**