Kazakhstan: Ensure accountability for attack, protect journalists

Brussels, Oslo, The Hague, Warsaw 24 April 2012. International Partnership for Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights are dismayed by the brutal attack on Kazakhstani journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov and support the call made by representatives of Kazakhstan’s civil society and journalist community for a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation of the attack. In light of this attack, as well as other recent assaults on journalists in Kazakhstan, the organizations also urge the Kazakhstani authorities to adopt effective measures to protect and ensure the safety of journalists when they carry out their professional duties.

“This terrible attack is unprecedented in its severity in Kazakhstan and sets a chilling precedent for all journalists in the country who scrutinize and report on matters of public interest,” said Brigitte Dufour, director of International Partnership for Human Rights.

Lukpan Akhmedyarov was attacked in the evening of 19 April 2012 outside the apartment building where he lives with his family in the city of Uralsk in northwestern Kazakhstan. A number of unknown individuals attacked him from behind, hitting him on the head with a heavy object, stabbing him several times and shooting at him with an air gun. He required emergency surgery for the injuries he sustained, which included a bad head injury and stab wounds to his lungs, kidneys, stomach and other vital internal organs. He has now regained consciousness, but remains in hospital in a serious condition.

“The Kazakstani authorities have a responsibility under international human rights law to vigorously investigate this attack, paying particular attention to uncovering the motives of it and its possible links to Akhmedyarov’s professional and civic activities,” said Bjørn Engesland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

A criminal case of attempted murder has been opened into the attack on Lukpan Akhmedyarov and police are reportedly looking for the suspected perpetrators. In a comment made to a major Kazakhstani TV channel, Uralsk Prosecutor Batyr Dzhazbaev stated that the preliminary investigation indicated that the attack was not politically motivated. However, Akhmedyarov’s colleagues are convinced that the attack on him is related to his reporting and civic engagement.

A journalist with the Uralskaya Nedelya, Lukpan Akhmedyarov is known for articles critically examining the activities of authorities and other public actors. He has faced several defamation lawsuits because of such writings. In a case currently pending in court, a high-ranking regional level official is requesting 5 million Tenge (some 25,000 EUR) in moral compensation for an article written by Akhmedyarov on the topic of family connections among those serving in public administration. The trial in this case is set to begin on 27 April 2012, although Akhmedyarov is still in hospital.

Akhmedyarov has also organized and participated in protests against government policies and has been detained and fined several times for his involvement in such protests. This year he has taken part in the
movement behind the so-called “disagreement” rallies, which have been organized in Almaty, Astana and other cities to protest against official policies, in particular the forceful response by authorities to the December 2011 Zhanaozen riots. Akhmedyarov has coordinated the holding of rallies in Uralsk and mobilized support for them online. A “disagreement” rally was held with permission by authorities in the city in late March, while an application to hold a new one in late April has been rejected.

In the first few months of 2012, Akhmedyarov has reported facing a series of harassment that appear linked to his professional and civic engagement, including being held under surveillance, being stopped by police in his car on the pretext of suspicion of narcotics possession and being summoned and warned by local authorities. Akhmedyarov’s wife has also reported facing intimidation at her workplace due to her husband’s activities.

“It is crucial that the Kazakhstani authorities ensure that all those who planned, organized and carried out the attack on Akhmedyarov are brought to justice, tried in a transparent process and adequately penalized,” said Harry Hummel, director of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee. “This will send a clear signal that there can be no impunity for acts such as this one,” he added.

The attack on Lukpan Akhmedyarov follows a number of other recent physical attacks on journalists in Kazakhstan, but is the most vicious one to date. In many cases, measures taken to investigate and punish attacks on journalists have not been effective, the possibility of political motives has not been taken into account and the perpetrators have remained unpunished.

Last week’s attack can also be seen in the context of a generally worsening climate for independent and opposition journalists in Kazakhstan. In the recent period, such journalists have come under growing pressure because of spurious criminal and administrative charges, civil defamation suits involving excessive requests for damages, and other forms of intimidation and obstruction of their work. Igor Viniavsky, chief editor of the Vzglyad newspaper, was held in custody for eight weeks for allegedly authoring an anti-presidential leaflet before being released on 15 March 2012. Other journalists have been summoned and interrogated by security services in relation to their work.

“These recent trends highlight the urgency of further measures to ensure that journalists can work safely and freely in Kazakhstan and to facilitate the development of a healthy climate for freedom of expression in the country,” commented Lenur Kerymov, project coordinator with the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

An OSCE manual from last year may provide helpful guidance to the Kazakhstani authorities in this respect. It makes key recommendations for how to protect journalists in accordance with international human rights standards and provides examples of best practice.

The organizations issuing this appeal are:

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