



Oslo, 21.10.2016

The Honorable Thomas Shannon
Under Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Under Secretary Shannon,

I am writing to bring to your attention some cases of political prisoners in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. We consider these cases to be symptomatic of the overall human rights situation in the countries in question. I ask you to raise these cases under your meetings with high-level government officials during your visit to the region next week.

During your visit to Kazakhstan, I ask that you raise the case of civil society activists Mr. Max Bokayev and Mr. Talgat Ayan. Authorities in Atyrau in western Kazakhstan are currently criminally prosecuting the two on trumped-up charges brought in retaliation for their peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. Authorities arrested the two in May and later charged them with "dissemination of knowingly false information" (Article 274 of the Penal Code), "incitement of social discord" (Article 174) and violations of the law regulation public assemblies (Article 400). If the court finds them guilty they face up to ten years imprisonment.

Amid popular discontent with a proposed amendment to Kazakhstan's land law, Mr. Bokayev and Mr. Ayan earlier this year assumed a leading role in organizing and calling for peaceful protests against the amendments. The two publicly criticized the proposed reforms, organized peaceful rallies and called on the public to join the protest meetings. Mr. Bokayev and Mr. Ayan applied to local authorities for permission to hold a protest rally on May 21, instead the Atyrau city police arrested the two on May 17.

The criminal prosecution of Mr. Bokayev and Mr. Ayan endangers the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Kazakhstan. A guilty verdict against these innocent men would deal a crippling blow to freedom of expression and assembly, as well as to civil society as a whole, in Kazakhstan. I therefore call on you to urge the Kazakhstani authorities to release these two men and drop all charges against them.

During your visit to Kyrgyzstan, I ask you to call on the authorities to comply with the United Nations Human Rights Committee's calls from March this year to immediately free jailed political activist and journalist Azimjan Askarov.

During your visit to Uzbekistan I ask you to call on the Uzbekistani government to immediately free Mr. Muhammad Bekjanov, one of the world's longest-imprisoned journalists, as well as raise issues such as the endemic use of torture in detention sites, forced labor, freedom of expression; and to urge the Uzbekistani government to allow the United Nations rights monitors access to the country.

Mr. Under Secretary, the U.S. Department of State is known for defending and advocating for human rights in Central Asia. I ask you to take this importunity to stand up for human rights in the region.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Bjørn Engesland

Secretary General of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee