

URGENT ACTION

LIFE IMPRISONMENT FOR MISSING KAZAKH WRITER

Ethnic Kazakh writer Nagyz Muhammed has been convicted of “separatism” for gathering with his friends on Kazakhstan Independence Day, expressing opinions on Xinjiang’s “bilingual education” policy and encouraging Kazakhs living in Xinjiang to move to Kazakhstan. Refusing to plead guilty, Nagyz Muhammed testified in court that he had been beaten and burned by cigarette butts during interrogations. Sentenced to life imprisonment in September 2020, there are grave concerns for Nagyz Muhammed’s wellbeing.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Director Wang Jiang

Prison Administration Bureau of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region
No 380, Huanghe lu, Urumqi
830000, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region
People's Republic of China

Dear Director Wang:

I write to express my concern for **Nagyz Muhammed**, an ethnic Kazakh writer convicted of “separatism” and sentenced to life imprisonment in September 2020 for peacefully exercising his human rights.

There are no official documents about the verdict, but Nagyz Muhammed's family report that he was convicted because he gathered with his friends on Kazakhstan Independence Day, expressed opinions on Xinjiang's “bilingual education” policy and encouraged Kazakhs living in Xinjiang to move to Kazakhstan, all of which are peaceful acts protected by international human rights law and standards.

I also find it distressing that Nagyz Muhammed has been denied his right to a fair trial as he was not able to be represented by a lawyer of his choice. During the court hearing, Nagyz Muhammed was represented by a government-appointed lawyer. As documented by Amnesty International, with similar cases of long imprisonments on vague charges, few lawyers are willing to take up Xinjiang-related cases because these cases are deemed too sensitive.

It is further disturbing to learn that the court has not dealt with Nagyz Muhammed's claims during the trial that he had been beaten and burned by cigarettes during interrogations, which raises concern as to whether his conviction may have been based on evidence obtained through torture and other ill-treatment. Detained incommunicado since March 2018, I am deeply concerned about his current and future wellbeing.

I therefore call on you to:

- **Release Nagyz Muhammed unless there is sufficient, credible and admissible evidence that he committed an internationally recognized offence and is granted a fair trial in line with international standards**
- **Pending his release, ensure Nagyz Muhammed is not subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Nagyz Muhammed is an ethnic Kazakh Chinese citizen who worked as a writer in Altay's State Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) in northwestern China. He is also a member of the Xinjiang Writers Association who has published two collections of poetry. His family relocated to Kazakhstan in 2012 for better education opportunities. Since then, he has travelled to Kazakhstan multiple times to visit his family.

In early 2018, Nagyz Muhammed travelled to Almaty, Kazakhstan, to stay with relatives after undergoing heart surgery in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. In March 2018, his colleague in China asked him to get back to work urgently. Returning to Altay later that month, Nagyz Muhammed was summoned to the local police station and questioned about his last visit to Kazakhstan.

In April 2020, his family were told by a source that he had been convicted of "separatism" and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. However, his family could never confirm it because there were no official documents about the verdict. It was only in September 2020 that his family learned that the information from their source was not true. Though no official documents about the verdict have been made available to his family or lawyer, some relatives were allowed to attend the court hearing behind a screen.

Xinjiang is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China. More than half of the region's population of 22 million people belong to mostly Turkic and predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, including Uyghurs (around 11.3 million), Kazakhs (around 1.6 million) and other populations whose languages, cultures and ways of life vary distinctly from those of the Han who are the majority in "interior" China.

Media reports have illustrated the extent of new draconian security measures implemented since Chen Quanguo came into power as Xinjiang's Party Secretary in 2016. In October 2016, there were numerous reports that authorities in the region had confiscated Uyghur passports in an attempt to further curtail their freedom of movement. In March 2017, the Xinjiang government enacted the "De-extremification Regulation" that identifies and prohibits a wide range of behaviours labelled "extremist", such as "spreading extremist thought", denigrating or refusing to watch public radio and TV programmes, wearing burkas, having an "abnormal" beard, resisting national policies, and publishing, downloading, storing, or reading articles, publications, or audio-visual materials containing "extremist content". The regulation also set up a "responsibility system" for government cadres for "anti-extremism" work and established annual reviews of their performance.

It is estimated that up to a million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim people have been held in the "transformation-through-education" centres. The Chinese authorities had denied the existence of such facilities until October 2018, when they began describing them as voluntary, free "vocational training" centres. They claim that the objective of this vocational training is to provide people with technical and vocational education to enable them to find jobs and become "useful" citizens. China's explanation, however, contradicts reports of beatings, food deprivation and solitary confinement that have been collected from former detainees.

China has rejected calls from the international community, including Amnesty, to allow independent experts unrestricted access to Xinjiang. Instead, China has made efforts to silence criticism by inviting delegations from different countries to visit Xinjiang for carefully orchestrated and closely monitored tours.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Chinese, English
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 29 December 2020
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: [Nagyz Muhammed] (he/him)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/2219/2020/en/>

And copies to:

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