



Mr. Sooronbay Jeenbekov
 President of Kyrgyzstan
 Presidential administration
 205 Chuy Prospect
 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Via email: pisma@mail.gov.kg, oip@adm.gov.kg

RE: Case of Azimjon Askarov

Brussels, 31 March 2020,

Your Excellency,

We, international human rights and press freedom organisations, recognize this is a very challenging time for the government and people of Kyrgyzstan as the country deals with the threat posed by the COVID-19 virus. The government has already taken some important steps, and others may be necessary, especially to protect those most at risk.

On 22 March, the Government of Kyrgyzstan declared state of emergency measures and introduced restrictions on public life after several people in the country were diagnosed with COVID-19.

As you know, populations in places of detention, such as prisons and jails, face a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 because people live in close proximity to each other and have little possibility of taking preventive steps, including physical distancing and isolation. States have an obligation to ensure medical care for all those in their custody at least equivalent to that available to the general population, in line with Rule 24.1 of the Nelson Mandela Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and must not deny or limit detainees' equal access to preventive, curative or palliative health care.¹

As recently underlined by the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture², and separately by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet,³ governments should also consider reducing their

¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [General Comment No. 14 on the right to health](https://www.un.org/ga/search/viewm_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/175), para. 34; UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2015, A/RES/70/175: https://www.un.org/ga/search/viewm_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/175

² See statement of March 25, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/OPCAT/AdviceStatePartiesCoronavirusPandemic2020.pdf>

³ Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 "rampaging through places of detention" – 25 March 2020: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25745&LangID=E>

prison populations, including by considering if the present situation qualifies prisoners for parole, early or conditional release, or other alternative non-custodial measures. Individuals at high risk of suffering serious effects from the virus, such as older people and people with underlying health conditions, should also be considered for similar release with regard to whether the detention facility has the capacity to protect their health.

We therefore call upon your government to guarantee adequate medical care and protective measures against COVID-19 for all prisoners and prison staff.

In this context, we would like to bring to your attention the continued detention of human rights defender and journalist Azimjon Askarov. We would like to call upon you to urgently release Mr. Askarov, and until then ensure that actions are taken to protect his health, ensure access to appropriate hygiene, screening and if needed medical assistance.

Mr. Askarov is now 68 years old and has for years suffered from deteriorating health, including cardiac and respiratory problems, and has not received appropriate and adequate medical attention. Mr. Askarov is among the population that is at risk of being disproportionately affected by the virus.

We would like to remind you that in 2016 the UN Human Rights Committee called on your Government to immediately release Azimjon Askarov and for his conviction to be quashed. We call on your government to urgently implement this decision.

Mr. Askarov has already served close to 10 years in prison simply for having documented human rights violations faced by others. We hope you and your government will support the humanitarian imperative of Mr. Askarov's situation and allow him to go free.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International

Civil Rights Defenders

Committee to Protect Journalists

Front Line Defenders

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Human Rights Watch

International Federation for Human Rights, within the framework of the **Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**

International Partnership for Human Rights

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the **Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**