

Urgent Statement on Human Rights and Environmental Defenders in Kazakhstan

February 12, 2021

Crude Accountability is deeply concerned by the recent wave of attacks on independent civil society and free media in Kazakhstan, in a clear attempt by the authorities to intimidate them and hinder them from doing their work. We call on the Kazakhstani authorities to stop the harassment of peaceful human rights defenders, and urge the international community to follow the current situation closely, ensuring that the concerns of Kazakhstani civil society are addressed.

In recent weeks, Kazakhstani environmental defenders, journalists, and independent NGOs are facing hostility, attacks, and injustice while peacefully conducting their work.

This includes the case of prominent environmental defender Max Bokaev, who was released from prison on February 4 after serving his 5-year sentence for organizing peaceful demonstrations in Western Kazakhstan in protest against amendments to Land Code legislation in 2016.

Even though Bokaev is no longer incarcerated, he still faces extreme and inhumane restrictions, which hinder his livelihood and basic rights. Bokaev is not allowed to hold a job or receive any money for services. In addition, he cannot participate in any civic or political activity such as joining a movement, a peaceful protest, a political party, or a religious or professional organization. He cannot volunteer, talk to journalists, collect signatures, or sign a petition. He is not allowed to participate in peaceful protests or any sort of mass gathering, with the exception of a funeral. These restrictions, just like the prison term, were put in place even though there is no evidence that the unsanctioned protests he was sentenced for caused any serious disruption of public order.

We are deeply concerned by the criminal case and intimidation against our friend and colleague Lukpan Akhmedyarov, journalist and editor of “Uralskaya Nedelya” (Uralsk Weekly) independent newspaper.

In November 2020, Akhmedyarov uncovered a corruption scheme that allegedly involved an employee of the local prosecutor's office, who was engaged in illegal land distribution. In February 2021, Akhmedyarov was subpoenaed and interrogated several times at the request of the prosecutor's office. Akhmedyarov is being investigated for allegedly disclosing “information of pre-trial proceedings or closed court proceedings.” If convicted, he could face up to two years in jail. In addition to multiple interrogations and required appearances at the police station, on February 3 he was illegally detained while

on the way to report on Bokaev's release. Targeting Akhmedyarov obstructs the principles of free speech and should stop immediately.

In late January, Kazakhstani authorities brought charges against several prominent nongovernmental organizations including the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) for minor infractions, threatening to suspend their activities. This practice of inundating non-profits with bureaucratic hurdles, court appearances, and unnecessary paperwork is intimidating, time- and resource-consuming, and disruptive to NGOs' essential and important work.

Following a domestic and international outcry against this practice, the charges against these NGOs were dropped, demonstrating that domestic and international pressure and attention can successfully safeguard civil society concerns.

We urge Kazakhstan's international partners to speak out against the current campaign of intimidation and harassment against human rights and free media in Kazakhstan, and we urge the government of Kazakhstan to stop harassment and intimidation of environmental defenders, journalists, and civil society organizations.