

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/10/kyrgyzstans-unfinished-business>

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Five years ago this month I was in Osh documenting cases of arbitrary arrest, ill treatment and torture in the aftermath of the ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. The deep bruises on the body of one man I spoke with are still imprinted on my mind. He had been released from custody a day before I visited his neighborhood.

Given the calm that has returned to southern Kyrgyzstan since the June 2010 violence, and the Kyrgyz governments desire to move definitively past those violent days, the lack of accountability for the arbitrary arrests, ill treatment, and torture during the [investigations and trials](#) following the violence may no longer seem pressing.

But the case of an elderly human rights defender who is spending the rest of his life in prison is one reason not to let sleeping dogs lie. We documented ill treatment and torture in dozens of cases related to the June 2010 investigations. But for all of us who responded to the crisis in southern Kyrgyzstan at that time, the case of [Azimjon](#) Askarov stands out as a particularly egregious miscarriage of justice, and for him, an injustice he continues to live with every day.

Moving on does not indeed, definitely should not mean sweeping past abuses under the rug, nor ignoring the blatant lack of justice for those abuses.

Moving on also cannot mean letting so many people languish in prison on sentences related to the violence that was meted out following trials marred by torture-tainted confessions, hostility to, and attacks on the defendants and their lawyers in the courtroom, and serious violations of due process.

The [June 2010 ethnic violence](#) left more than 400 people dead and nearly 2,000 houses destroyed. Horrific crimes were committed against both ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks. But while ethnic Uzbeks suffered the majority of casualties and destroyed homes, criminal investigations also disproportionately targeted ethnic Uzbeks. In recent years, the authorities have taken some steps to rebuild neighbourhoods that were damaged in the violence, and have undertaken some other efforts to promote stability and reconciliation. But for many ethnic Uzbeks in the south, a feeling of vulnerability persists.

Azimjon aka

Azimjon aka, as we call him to show respect (aka is an honorific title in Uzbek), was already 60 when he was arrested in June 2010 for organising mass disturbances and inciting interethnic hatred leading to the killing of a policeman in Bazar Kurgan, a town in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Before his arrest, he courageously documented human rights abuses in particular, relating to prison conditions and police abuse of detainees in an effort to hold authorities accountable before the law. But it isn't his profession as a human rights defender that makes the life sentence handed to him in September 2010 such a glaring miscarriage of justice.

The miscarriage of justice stems directly from the Kyrgyz authorities utter failure to ensure that Askarov received a fair trial to which everyone in Kyrgyzstan, regardless of profession, ethnicity, or creed, is entitled.

Askarov was arrested in June 2010 and held in police custody for days before he was given access to a lawyer of his choosing. He has [alleged](#) that the police ill treated and tortured him. His lawyer told Human Rights Watch at the time that he believed Askarov's body bore marks of severe beatings that happened shortly after he was detained.

There is also photographic evidence to substantiate his claims, but no one ever bothered to open a full investigation, and the court ignored his and the other defendants' allegations when handing down long even life-long prison sentences.

Askarov's lawyer was threatened and physically attacked during the trial, and angry mobs repeatedly and violently interrupted the hearings. Police took no action. Askarov's lawyer tried unsuccessfully to have the trial hearings moved from southern Kyrgyzstan to ensure the safety of defence witnesses, lawyers, and the defendants themselves, but the judge refused, instead threatening to have the defence lawyers stripped of their licences if they failed to show up at the next hearing.

Askarov should not be languishing in prison. He should be released immediately pending a fair and impartial review of his trial. His allegations of ill treatment and torture should be investigated and the officers who ill-treated and tortured him punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Until that happens, the events of June 2010 need to remain as real today as they were five years ago, and the government of Kyrgyzstan held accountable.

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