

A tragedy foretold: Norway condemns Uzbek activist to jail and torture

08.07.2012 22:45 msk

Michael Andersen

human rights - uzbekistan

"I will be arrested the minute I land in Uzbekistan and then thrown in prison," an Uzbek human rights activist tells me, "and what happens with me afterwards is a good question."

For his family's safety, I cannot tell you the name of the young man. Let's call him Rustam, a common name in Uzbekistan.

"I only have five minutes, then they cut off the phone," the 26-year old explains.

Since 12 June he has been held at the immigration services detention centre in Oslo, Norway, after having received the third and final rejection of his appeal for political asylum. He will be deported on 12 July.

Looking at his case it is obvious that the Norwegian authorities are ignoring evidence showing that returning Rustam to Uzbekistan is as good as sentencing him to torture, even death. They have also disregarded UN evidence that says returned Uzbek dissidents who sought refugee status abroad have been disappeared and subjected to torture.

It is easy to detect the fear in Rustam's voice. In 2004, he and some friends started an NGO called Movement for Freedom and initiated a campaign against child slave labour. Every year, two million Uzbek school children — the youngest just 7 years old — are forced to spend six to eight weeks picking cotton, eight to 10 hours a day.

Uzbekistan has been heavily criticised for this abuse of children. But the income from cotton exports runs into hundreds of millions of dollars, and much of it falls into the pockets of the Uzbek dictator Islam Karimov, who has been in power for 23 years since Soviet times.

When Rustam and his friends started their campaign against child slavery, he was detained and tortured. Upon his release, Rustam fled to Russia. While he was in hiding, he heard that one of the Movement's co-founders had been killed in an Uzbek prison. He decided to move on to Norway.

Russia, a close ally of the Karimov regime, routinely extradites Uzbeks. Afterwards many of them 'disappear'.

The authorities in Norway have two problems with Rustam's plea for asylum:

1/ Rustam does not have a passport. Rustam says he threw it away when he smuggled himself out of Uzbekistan to ensure he could not be identified by the police if he was apprehended. But it means outside Uzbekistan Rustam now cannot prove that he is who he claims to be.

2/ While Rustam was in Norway hoping to be granted asylum, he started working as a volunteer for the Uzbek human rights defender Mutabar Tadjibaeva. This is now the heart of Rustam's appeal: the Norwegian authorities do not believe that he worked as her webmaster.

Because of her international standing, Tadjibaeva is hated by the Karimov regime; working with her would land Rustam in very serious trouble in Uzbekistan.

Tadjibaeva has been living in exile in France since in 2008 escaping after three years of prison, rape and torture in Uzbekistan. The country has more than 10,000 political and religious prisoners and experts put it amongst the harshest dictatorships in the world, on par with North Korea.

Tadjibaeva runs the website Jayaron, one of very few independent sources of information about Uzbekistan, a country in which media are strictly controlled by the regime. She has established a

widespread network of informants inside the country who send her details about corrupt court cases, unfair imprisonments and cases of torture. Her site is a thorn in the side of a regime that has almost managed to completely isolate its population from the outside world.

The Karimov regime call Tadjibaeva an "extremist" and accuse her of planning to overthrow the government, which is rather difficult to imagine when you meet her in person — a small, soft-spoken 49-year-old woman, her health scarred by years of torture and prison.

After Tadjibaeva received it, a Wikileaks telegram revealed that the American ambassador in Tashkent received a "tongue lashing" from the Uzbek dictator, who threatened to block US transit to Afghanistan in retaliation.

The ambassador advised his government to tone down the criticism of the Uzbek regime, advice they took. And relations are nearer to the close relationship the countries enjoyed before Karimov's army killed 800 demonstrators, many of them women and children, in May 2005.

Mutabar Tadjibaeva stresses to me that Rustam has worked with her since August 2010. She cannot understand why the Norwegian immigration authorities rejected Rustam's asylum plea, stressing that they do not believe that he and Mutabar work together.

"The Uzbek regime does not like people telling the truth," she adds. "I have no less than 343 emails here in which we discuss Rustam's work with our website and my blog," she tells me, "that obviously prove that we worked closely together."

"If the Norwegians really wanted to know the truth, all they have to do is check his computer, mobile phone and emails." She showed me the email and text communication between the two.

"I have even transferred money to him in Norway, so he could buy a computer and work on our website," Mutabar explains. She shows me receipts.

At the moment it looks like that Rustam will be deported to Uzbekistan within the next week.

But in June something happened which Mutabar hopes will help Rustam. The UN Committee against Torture censured Kazakhstan — Uzbekistan's neighbour — for deporting 29 Uzbek asylum seekers in 2010. Several of the 29 were later given lengthy prison sentences, kept in isolation and therefore, say analysts, most likely tortured.

UN conventions forbid states deporting people to their home countries if there is a risk that they will be tortured.

Exact numbers are impossible to come by — this is Uzbekistan — but according to local human rights organisations dozens of people are tortured to death each year in Uzbek prisons, and the favourite victims of the security police are those who have been in the West asking for asylum or even speaking poorly about the regime. This description clearly applies to Rustam.

Mutabar Tadjibaeva hopes that the UN decision will make Norway re-consider his case. "But," she adds, "so-called democratic countries in Europe have often shown themselves full-willing to close their eyes to the atrocities of the Uzbek regime. I have lost all faith in them."

Michael Andersen is a Danish journalist who has covered Central Asia for more than 10 years/

Source - [Index on censorship](#)