

## **Kazakhstan: Journalist Ends Hunger Strike**

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Well-known reporter calls off protest following concerns over his deteriorating health.

Supporters of Kazak journalist and opposition activist Sergei Duvanov, who has been imprisoned on rape charges, persuaded him to give up his hunger strike at the weekend.

Six demos in support of the reporter have been held in Almaty in the past week, with police arresting 40 protesters, jailing seven of them for several days. More than 70 people took part in the latest rally, held today (November 13).

At the same time, around 20 activists across the country have joined opposition politicians Marat Uatkan and Gulzhan Ergalieva in a hunger strike, also intended to draw attention to Duvanov's plight.

The journalist has been refusing food and water since his detention on October 28. Members of a support group set up after his arrest intervened after prison medics warned that the reporter's life was at risk.

In a note passed to his lawyers and friends, Duvanov had written, "The course of the trial and its outcome have already been decided, but those who want to see me guilty will get my corpse instead."

Group member Rozlana Taukina told IWPR that the decision to intervene was taken after Duvanov - who was so weak that he could not walk or talk - was force-fed by prison staff.

His supporters are demanding an independent inquiry into the circumstances of his alleged crime, claiming that he was set up by the authorities after previous attempts to silence him failed.

Analysts believe the Duvanov's case is a sign that the authorities are now targeting journalists in the same way as their political opponents - pressure and intimidation followed by imprisonment.

Exiled former prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin was handed a ten-year jail term in absentia last year. And the leaders of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement, Galymzhan Zhakianov and Mukhtar Abliazov, received lengthy prison sentences in July of this year.

All three former high-ranking officials were accused of misuse of office, although their supporters claim the trials were politically motivated.

During the summer, Duvanov was charged with insulting the honour and dignity of President Nursultan Nazarbaev after an article linking the Kazak leader's circle to overseas bank accounts was published on an opposition website.

In August, Duvanov was beaten up by three unknown assailants as he was preparing for a meeting with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Analysts have drawn parallels between this incident and his recent arrest, which came on the eve of another overseas trip - this time to speak on the republic's human rights situation to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in America.

Duvanov's supporters believe that the authorities have chosen to charge the journalist with rape because such a heinous charge will make it more difficult for the international community to spring to his defence.

According to Bakhytjamal Bekturganova, head of the Association of Sociologists and Political Analysts, "The authorities are trying to destroy Duvanov by ruining his reputation."

The independent journalist edits a monthly bulletin for the Kazak Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law in partnership with IWPR.

His trial is expected to get underway later this month, but Duvanov is very pessimistic about its outcome. "The government will not miss the chance to put an obstinate journalist in jail," he said recently.

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**Focus:** Central Asia

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