

## **Kyrgyz Trial Angers Uigurs**

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Uigurs angry over Bishkek claim that murder of community leader was politically-motivated.

A murder trial in Bishkek has touched off furious claims that the Kyrgyz government is persecuting its ethnic Uigur minority to curry favour with China.

Before the court are four men accused of murdering Nigmat Bazakov, head of the Uigur association Ittipak, who was shot dead outside his home in front of dozens of witnesses on March 28, 2000.

The prosecution claims he was killed for refusing to support Uigur separatists. From the start of the trial, the Uigur community has vehemently spurned this version of events, saying that Bazakov, a prosperous businessman, was shot in a financial dispute.

The defendants are alleged to have been working for an organisation called Shark Azatlyk Tashkilaty, SAT, which means Organisation for Liberation of the Orient. The group was founded in the Xinjiang-Uigur Autonomous Region, XUAR, of China in the early 1990s with a purported goal to create a strictly Moslem state named East Turkestan which would embrace a swathe of Chinese territory.

Chased out by Chinese security, SAT activists found a refuge in neighbouring Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan which already had large Uigur communities and offered a freer operating environment. SAT sought Bazakov's support to help it get a foothold in the local Uigur community.

Uigurs in Kyrgyzstan had previously attempted to form their own organisation called Uigurstan Azatlyk Tashkilaty (Organisation for Liberation of Uigurstan). But the Kyrgyz justice ministry refused to let it operate, citing Kyrgyzstan's friendly ties with China.

According to Tursun Islamov, chairman of the Demokratia human rights organisation, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian nations have been increasingly targeting Uigurs as undesirable aliens since the Shanghai Organisation for Cooperation, SOC, was formed to promote mutual assistance in fighting terrorism, extremism and separatism.

Uigur separatism has been specifically branded as a threat to regional security at SOC meetings in Shanghai. Analysts believe that in return for military assistance, China is expecting Kyrgyzstan to help it suppress the "Xinjiang threat".

Police said one of the accused was caught in possession of a SAT mission statement urging all Uigurs to join in the struggle against "Chinese colonists" until East Turkestan (Xinjiang) was completely free. SAT also punishes "traitors and renegades", trains fighters for the national liberation army of East Turkestan, and calls for a pan-Moslem Jihad.

Accused of masterminding Bazakov's assassination was the head of the SAT office in Kyrgyzstan, Kasarji Jalal Mahmud, an ethnic Uigur from Turkey. Like many Uigur expats in Kyrgyzstan, he came here in the early 1990s to do business, married a local Uigur woman, and was planning to settle down in Bishkek.

Other defendants besides Kasarji, who is a Turkish citizen, include Otabek Akhadov, 22, an Uzbek known as

a contract killer and two Chinese nationals Muhamed Toktoniaz, 27, and Ablemit Kerim, 29, both Uigurs. An investigator told IWPR, "We found a gun on Akhadov and our forensic experts proved it was weapon that killed Bazakov. One old woman wrote down the license plate number of the car in which the killer left the scene. The car was found and the driver also identified Akhadov. Yes, the prosecution has plenty of evidence."

The investigator showed us items found on the defendants: there were SAT mission statements, oaths taken by its members and their photographs, a satellite phone, various weapons and ammunition and forged IDs.

On top of Bazakov's assassination, the four are being charged with a terrorist attack against a Chinese government delegation in Bishkek which left one Chinese official dead and four wounded on May 25, 2000. Other charges are the kidnapping of a Chinese businessman in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan, along with illegal possession of firearms, forgery, and a number of lesser counts adding up to 18 overall.

The Office of the Uzbek Prosecutor General told the Kyrgyz interior ministry that Otabek Akhadov belonged to the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, and is wanted on suspicion of bomb attacks in Tashkent during 1999. The chief investigator of the Kyrgyz interior ministry, Vadim Nemirovich, told IWPR he could prove that IMU recommended Akhadov to SAT as an efficient hitman.

A law enforcement officer told IWPR the Kyrgyz people had always sympathised with the freedom aspirations of Xinjiang Uigurs. "According to official figures, there are upwards of 50,000 Uigurs in Kyrgyzstan at the moment. In fact, there are around 150,000 of them," he told us, "About 80 per cent of Kyrgyz Uigurs came here in the 1950s and 60s when times were specially hard for them in China."

A National Security Service spokesman, Nurkul Sulaimanov, denied that SOC was putting pressure on Kyrgyzstan to clamp down on Uigurs. "The accusations are utterly groundless," he said. "The SOC is an international body whose mission is to ensure stability and security in the Central Asian region. It is by no means concerned with discrediting any specific nation or ethnicity."

A law enforcement officer who declined to be named told IWPR, "Kyrgyzstan has strong contractual bonds with China under bilateral and international treaties. If China asks us to extradite a person accused of illegal activity in China we are obliged to do so. But whenever we extradite a Chinese Uigur, the local community stages rallies and protests all over the place. I believe that all citizens of this country, whether Uigur or Kyrgyz, must first of all act in the interests of Kyrgyzstan."

Few, if any, Uigurs living in Kyrgyzstan believe that SAT had anything to do with Bazakov's assassination. "Kasarji has been in jail since 1998. How could he have masterminded the killing?" asked Murzaparkhan Kurban, editor of the Bishkek-based Uigur-language paper Vijda Avazi. "Incidentally, Nigmat Bazakov was Kasarji's public defender in the 1998 trial. No, I don't think Kasarji killed Bazakov. The real reason is that the Kyrgyz authorities are after us. The press portrays Uigurs as some kind of new Chechens. XUAR natives are accused of cooperating with all manner of terrorists and militants, such as the Uzbek IMU whose guerrillas have raided southern Kyrgyzstan twice."

Tursun Islamov contends the world's 25 million Uigurs have long since abandoned all ambitions to their own statehood. "The whole Bazakov case was rigged," Islamov said. "Uigurs have been wrongfully accused by Kyrgyz authorities of secret dealings with extremists."

The Demokratiya human rights organisation said four Xinjiang Uigurs have been extradited from Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan to China and sentenced to death in the last three years. The organisation said this violates the principles of international law because "it is unfair to send people back to where their lives are in danger".

If a harsh sentence is handed down to Bazakov's four alleged assassins uproar is certain to explode among Uigur activists. The outcome of the trial looks uncertain as the defendants flatly deny all charges and their attorneys cite lack of evidence. Defendants and witnesses change their testimonies all the time, and some witnesses never even showed up. Meanwhile, defendants' relatives and local Uigur activists insisted the murder was all to do with a quarrel about money.

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