

Mixed Messages for Independent Journalists

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Police ministry says it wants to deal fairly with the independent media, as its officers step up persecution of journalists and activists.

Independent journalists in Uzbekistan have welcomed an unprecedented move by the country's interior ministry not only to meet them but also to dismiss rumours it planned to clamp down on their freedom of speech.

At the same time, while welcoming the ministry's move towards positive engagement, reporters noted that persecution of independent journalists and human rights activists is on the increase.

A group of journalists wrote to Interior Minister Zakir Almatov after growing increasingly alarmed at reports appearing on Russian-language internet sites based outside Uzbekistan, which claimed to have inside knowledge of official plans to mount a campaign of persecution of independent reporters and other

A series of articles written by one Safar Abdullaev - presumably a pseudonym - cited secret interior ministry documents setting out a two-year schedule for large-scale repressions against individuals seen as opponents of the state, including journalists, human rights activists and supporters of the opposition.

Abdullaev names six journalists who have worked with IWPR among those who are to be "dealt with" first - allegedly by August this year.

The interior ministry reacted both swiftly and positively to the reporters' enquiries, inviting them to a meeting on April 15 to discuss their concerns.

The ministry, like other government institutions in Uzbekistan, has in the past been reluctant to talk to the media. This meeting came as a surprise since it was the first time ministry officials had sought to engage with the small independent media sector.

The meeting was led by Deputy Interior Minister Alisher Sharafutdinov, who rejected the rumoured existence of secret documents.

"It is completely absurd," said Sharafutdinov. "I can state that there are no documents about repression at the ministry, nor have there been any - still less, documents containing lists."

Sharafutdinov said that as long as journalists do not break the law, "the interior ministry has no intention to persecute them".

Journalists who took part in the meeting said afterwards that they were pleased with the way it went, as they had really been expecting the ministry to simply ignore their letter.

Some suggested that the ministry was prompted to present its own position because the internet reports had alleged that Almatov himself was the prime mover behind the secret plans to pursue opponents.

"The interior ministry found itself in a difficult situation, and was forced to respond," said journalist Kudrat Babajanov, who was one of those named on the alleged black list.

"But I see their reaction as a positive step."

Others agreed, saying they thought that ministry officials had dealt with them honestly, and that there was no organised plan to persecute them - certainly not in the name of Almatov.

But just as the meeting appeared to offer a genuinely new basis for frank and transparent engagement between the police ministry and the independent media, events on the ground suggested that some law-enforcement officers were reading from a different set of instructions.

The sense of relief the reporters took away from the meeting was clouded over by the evening when they heard news of a shocking incident that had happened to one of their colleagues the same day.

Mutabar Tajibaeva, who heads the Ardent Hearts Club, a human rights group in the town of Fergana, was abducted by unknown men while driving by taxi to attend the interior ministry meeting.

When she was returned to Fergana at six the same evening, eight-and-a-half hours after she was put into another vehicle and driven away, Tajibaeva was so scared that she refused to say who had abducted her or what had happened to her.

Speaking by phone from Fergana, Tajibaeva talked in a weak voice that did not sound like her at all. Her abductors, she said, were "very frightening, very strong and very angry".

"We are simply nothing compared to them, we are mere pawns," she said.

The activists said she is sure her abductors were planning to kill her, but she may have been saved because she told them she had been in contact with an international organisation.

Tajibaeva said she was now writing a farewell note, in which she would reveal who had abducted her.

The incident greatly upset independent reporters and human rights activists.

"I didn't recognise her voice - what did they do to her?" asked journalist Yusuf Rasulov. "She is preparing for death."

Other cases added to the concerns.

The same day the meeting was held, human rights activists from the centrally-located Jizzakh region reported that they were facing increased harassment.

Bakhtier Hamraev, of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, said both interior ministry police and National Security Service men were involved, "If they used to watch us secretly in the past, now they do it openly, and each activist is constantly followed by a car."

The heavy surveillance is hindering activists from going out of their homes to attend meetings, Hamraev said, noting that many of those who had planned to meet a visiting German diplomat on April 14 were prevented from doing so.

At the meeting with interior ministry officials, journalist Tulkin Karaev reported that in his home city of Karshi, southwest Uzbekistan, local police were summoning his friends and forcing them to write statements about why they associated with him.

"At the moment, as I sit in the interior ministry, my surgeon friend is writing a statement at a police station," Karaev told Sharafutdinov.

Another journalist, Kudrat Babajanov, said that since March, tax officers in the northwestern Khorezm region where his family lives, have been conducting checks on his wife Manzura's firm. Babajanov is sure the authorities are using the tax police to put pressure on him through his family.

Tax officials carried out a long audit of his wife's shop, and were forced to leave after failing to find problems. They returned last week with documents that they said proved that Manzura had sold gold in the capital Tashkent.

"But Manzura never sold anything in Tashkent, it's a lie," said Babajanov.

The overall picture is one of mixed signals, leaving unanswered the question of which line is the official one - the conciliatory stance of the central interior ministry, or the apparently aggressive pursuit of dissidents.

Some commentators say that despite the positive noises made by the interior ministry, the authorities' overriding concern right now is how to head off any attempt to replicate last month's revolution in Kyrgyzstan.

"Even if the interior ministry does not have any lists of people to be repressed, it will continue to persecute strong opponents," said a political scientist who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"They will persecute them to save themselves. That is their nature, and they cannot now change."

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