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Public Statement

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Kazakhstan: Unprecedented attacks on a human rights defender

Elena Semionova, a human rights defender in Pavlodar, in Northern Kazakhstan, is being targeted by the Kazakhstani authorities because of her work on behalf of victims of torture. Since 2015 she has been subjected to ongoing harassment ranging from verbal threats to physical violence by police officers and even an arson attack on her house. Amnesty International has written to the Kazakhstani authorities calling on them to take action to investigate the various attacks against her and to ensure that she is protected from further attacks and able to continue her vital human rights work.

Elena Semionova is chair of the Pavlodar Public Monitoring Committee which monitors conditions in local detention facilities and documents cases of torture and other ill-treatment. She also runs an NGO which campaigns for victims of forced evictions. In 2015, a criminal case was started against her for “spreading knowingly false information” because of her posts on social media about torture in prisons in Pavlodar region. The case was dropped but the prison service of Pavlodar region issued an instruction banning her from visiting prisons meaning she can only visit pre-trial detention centres. She has challenged this ban in court but without success.

The attacks against her have intensified since July 2018 following a meeting in Strasbourg with members of the European Parliament (MEPs), at which she discussed torture in Kazakhstan. She also discussed allegations of torture in prisons in Karaganda region where a large number of prisoners had self-harmed in protest. A second criminal case was opened against her by the prison authorities of Karaganda region for “spreading knowingly false information”. Her house was searched, and several computers were confiscated.

In September 2018, she was prevented from travelling to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, to meet an MEP on the grounds that an administrative case had been started against her for taking part in an illegal protest. The case was subsequently dropped.

On 8 October, she was prevented from boarding a plane to Strasbourg for another meeting with MEPs. The same day somebody tried to set fire to her house: two bottles of flammable liquid were thrown at the façade. One caused some damage and the second failed to ignite. In November, two employees of the prison service started libel actions against her for having written about them as perpetrators of torture and other ill-treatment in her publications. These actions

arose after she quoted the allegations of the prisoners themselves who referred to the officers by their first names. An investigation into the torture is on-going and both the criminal and administrative cases against Elena Semionova were dropped in December 2018, but one of the claimants started a civil case against her for libel.

The attacks have continued this year. On 14 January 2019, Elena was accompanying a client at the Yuzhny police station in Pavlodar, and police officers removed her from the room by force and insulted her verbally. Speaking immediately after the event on social media she said:

“I am shocked by what happened today. They used physical force against me, insults, they dragged me out of the room. I understand today how dangerous it is for me. It is frightening what happens in our police stations, people are defenceless. If this can happen to me a human rights defender, then the situation is even worse for others.”

The Kazakhstani authorities must protect human rights defenders from attacks and threats, and facilitate rather than hamper their work. Kazakhstan must live up to its international obligation to eradicate torture and other ill-treatment by cooperating with human rights defenders like Elena Semionova and recognizing their positive contribution to improving the situation for human rights in the country.

Background

Impunity for torture and other ill-treatment by law enforcement officials and in prisons remains a problem in Kazakhstan.¹ Despite the introduction of a new Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code in 2015, there are few if any effective legal remedies available to victims of this gross human rights violation. An ineffectual complaints process and a poor victim and witness protection system, combined with public distrust of state institutions means that very few victims attempt to seek justice.

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¹ See *Dead end justice: Impunity for torture in Kazakhstan*, Amnesty International, 3 March 2016, Index number: EUR 57/3345/2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur57/3345/2016/en/>