

13 May 2020

## Tajikistan – attack on and threats against Avazmad Ghurbatov

On 11 May 2020, two unknown masked men attacked human rights defender and journalist **Avazmad Ghurbatov** (pen name Abdulloh Ghurbati) near his house in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. In April and May the journalist has received threats for his coverage of COVID-19.

Avazmad Ghurbatov is a human right defender and correspondent for the independent news website Asia-Plus. Prior to this he worked for Tajikistan's Center for Investigative Journalism. Avazmat Ghurbatov has reported on issues such as living conditions for people with disabilities and their right to participate in elections, raids on the homes of draftees and COVID-19, including its affect on small businesses, food prices and the overall atmosphere in the country during the pandemic.

On the evening of 11 May 2020, Avazmad Ghurbatov was attacked by two unidentified men outside his home in Dushanbe. He fell to the ground and the attackers continued to kick him, but once he shouted for help one of the men ran from the scene while the other continued to punch him. The attack left Avazmad Ghurbatov with cuts on his chest, forehead and ear and pain in his chest and at the back of his head. He was denied treatment in several hospitals initially due to COVID-19 restrictions, but was eventually treated in a clinic for burn victims. On 12 May he filed a complaint regarding the assault at a local police station.

Avazmad Ghurbatov has been receiving anonymous threats online for his coverage of COVID-19 since the mid April. On 13 April, Asia-Plus published the journalist's video informing people on the streets of Dushanbe that they should not be shaking hands for risk of infection. Soon after the video was published, an anonymous video was posted on social media in response, calling Avazamad Ghurbatov a "provocateur" and a "traitor" who is "seeking, like an idiot, a Corona virus that doesn't exist" in Tajikistan. The journalist later received messages on social media and anonymous phone calls, warning him that he should not raise "problematic" topics or write critical posts, and that he should "behave correctly". One caller threatened Avazamad Ghurbatov that they would "take anyone out of the way if he interfered with them".

At the end of April, Avazamad Ghurbatov was interviewed by RFE/RL Radio "Ozodi" as a passer-by in the street and asked about COVID-19. The journalist said he believed that Tajikistan should adhere to the WHO recommendations and cancel public events, such as the City Day celebration. After the segment was aired on the radio, he received anonymous threatening phone calls regarding his opinions given in the interview.

Front Line Defenders believes that the violent attack against Avazmad Ghurbatov and the threats he has received are an attempt to silence his criticism of the country's response to COVID-19. It believes that the recent attack and threatening messages and phone calls are in direct reprisal for his peaceful and legitimate work as a human rights defender and journalist in Tajikistan.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Tajikistan to:**

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attack and threats against Avzamad Ghurbatov, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Ensure that the ongoing investigation into the threats, intimidation and false accusations against Avzamad Ghurbatov be thorough and impartial, with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the human rights defender;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Kazakhstan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.