

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 7, 2020

His Excellency Sooronbay Jeenbekov
President of Kyrgyzstan
Presidential Administration
205 Chuy Prospect
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Dear President Jeenbekov:

We are writing to request that you release detainees currently serving sentences for peacefully expressing their views, including members of student groups, activists, and human rights defenders. Individuals should never be imprisoned for exercising their rights of freedom of assembly, association, and speech, and we urge you to release without preconditions your citizens currently in detention for these legitimate acts.

We call for releasing these individuals on the merits of their cases, but today, we also urge you to act quickly on health and humanitarian grounds. While all nations and citizens have been affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the risks to the detainee population are particularly acute given the enclosed living conditions. Our own country, like many others, has taken the extraordinary step to grant some prisoners early release in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. This move allows the facilities to increase their ability to follow social distancing recommendations and ensure standards of medical care for the remaining population.

We encourage you to seize this opportunity during this global crisis by releasing these individuals. While we write regarding all individuals detained in relation to acts of peaceful expression, we draw your attention to one case in particular:

We understand that in June 2010, Kyrgyz authorities arrested the founder of an organization monitoring prison conditions, **Azimjon Askarov**, for inciting protesters. In September 2010, a court found him guilty on unfounded charges of participating in mass disturbances, inciting ethnic hatred, and abetting the murder of a police officer. According to the UN Human Rights Committee, there is evidence that Mr. Askarov was subjected to acts of torture and that he was denied necessary medical care and access to a fair trial.¹ Based on reports from Human Rights Watch, he is currently serving a life sentence and is suffering from deteriorating health.² As you are likely aware, Mr. Askarov's case has generated significant international attention, including from Members of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Department of State, the United Nations, and non-

¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Human Rights Committee, "Views adopted by the Committee under article 5 (4) of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication No. 2231/2012," May 11, 2016, <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsukPtYsnxNH1DBeueuCbK4jydGVL0BUTM1fwSURKZc1vSa7AxDA06etHJbbV9%2fJloXTB1KEY6Xy7FxLG%2fUiwhyJHZlPk4RRVexBV7%2fMm5qOhv9K8Kr8MmOWMZtZSrm9soQ%3d%3d>.

² Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan: Free Ailing Rights Defender," Feb. 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/20/kyrgyzstan-free-ailing-rights-defender>.

governmental organizations. Today, he is at particular risk for COVID-19 due to his advanced age (late 60s) and risk of exposure from his fellow prisoners. We call for his immediate release.

We thank you for your consideration of our request and urge swift action on this case.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator