

Pretrial detention of Tajik stand-up comedian extended by another two months

At the request of the Sughd regional prosecutor's office, pretrial detention of Tajik stand-up comedian and independent journalist Khairullo Mirsaidov has been extended by another two months.

Ms. Gulchehra Ghoibnazrova, a senior aide to the Sughd chief prosecutor, says Mirsaidov's pretrial detention was extended for two more months at the request of the prosecutor with a view to conducting a "full and objective investigation" of the case.

According to her, the Sughd regional prosecutor's office is waiting for answer from International KVN Movement to its inquiry.

Some sources say the Sughd regional prosecutor's office has inquired about targeted use of funds provided by the regional administration to the Khujand-based KVN team.

Khairullo Mirsaidov was put under custody on December 5 and charges of misappropriation of state funds (Article 245, Part 4 of Tajikistan's Penal Code), inciting national racial, regional or religious enmity (Article 189, Part 2), document forgery (Article 340, Part 1) and false denunciation (Article 346, Part 2) were officially brought against him on December 8.

The charges brought against Mirsaidov carry up to a total of 21 years in prison under Tajikistan's Penal Code.

Khairullo Mirsaidov in November last year applied to the president, prosecutor-general and Sughd governor, asking them to pay attention to problems facing the Khujand-based KVN team because of some corrupt officials in the Sughd province. Mirsaidov publicly stated that Olim Zohidzoda, the head of the Sughd directorate for youth and sports affairs, demanded a US\$1,000 bribe.

Mirsaidov failed to produce evidence to support his application against Zohidzoda. Zohidzoda has filed a counterclaim against Mirsaidov accusing him of defamation.

The journalist's father, Habibullo Mirsaidov, says his son denies the charges brought against him.

Mirsaidov is an independent journalist and a former correspondent of the Dushanbe-based Asia-Plus news agency and Germany's Deutsche Welle radio.

He is also the leader of the Tajik national KVN comedy team, a stand-up comedy competition which originated among university students in the Soviet Union and is still popular in many post-Soviet states.

Mirsaidov's case has drawn international attention, with the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) releasing a statement in December calling on Tajikistan to release Mirsaidov and drop all charges against him.

Amnesty International (AI) on January 25 urged the Tajik authorities to "immediately" release Khairullo Mirsaidov, who has been in pretrial detention for more than a month. Amnesty International said in its statement that "Khairullo Mirsaidov is a prisoner of conscience who is being punished solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression."

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