

07 July 2017

Protection Unit
UNHCR Ankara
Turkey

**Re: Uzbekistan – Narzullo Akhunjonov and Shamsiya Khudaynazarova,
both journalists and poets.**

To whom it may concern,

I am writing on behalf of PEN International, the world association of writers with members in 150 countries worldwide, to support the application for refugee status and resettlement through the UNHCR of Uzbek journalists and poets Narzullo Akhunjonov and Shamsiya Khudaynazarova.

The couple are both journalists who had worked for the Uzbekistan national television and radio station until forced to leave the country in late 2013. Akhunjonov is a graduate of the Tashkent State Institute of Culture, and in 1990 taught at Tashkent State University faculty of Philosophy and Economics. He started out on his journalism career in 1995, taking up the post of chief of political law and education of the New Society program at Uzbekistan's national television and radio broadcaster, which he held from 2005 until he left Uzbekistan in 2013. Since 1997, he has been a contributor to the BBC Uzbek service, Voice of America and Radio Liberty/Free Europe's Uzbek service. His work for the BBC, for example, has included articles ranging from regional politics and jihadism, to Uzbek television culture and Turkish soap operas. In December 2015 he was the subject of a long [interview](#) piece for the BBC Uzbek service, where he talks about his career as a journalist. One of Akhunjonov's colleagues, a noted Uzbek journalist working for the BBC Uzbek service, describes him as a dissident journalist who is 'knowledgeable, objective, measured and reliable'.

Shamsiya Khudaynazarova also formerly worked for the Uzbekistan national broadcaster from 1998 until she left Uzbekistan with her husband in 2013. She graduated from Uzbekistan's National University faculty of journalism in 1998, having worked for a newspaper from 1994 while studying. On graduation, she joined Uzbekistan's national television and radio broadcaster as editor of its

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popular radio program, *Yoshlar* (Youthfulness). She also blogs for the BBC Uzbek service.

Both Akhunjonov and Khudaynazarova are published poets. In a long interview for the BBC Uzbek service, Khudaynazarova talks about her background from a family of artists and other inspirations for her poetry, some of which was published in collections in 1998 and 2007. The interview, in Uzbek, can be read [here](#). Some of Khudaynazarova's poems are available in English. Akhunjonov's poetry has been published in collections titled *Leaf of the Heart* in 1998, *Ways that lead to you*, also in 1998, *Sky in my Heart* in 2007, and *Dear Melodies* in 2013, all in Uzbek.

Akhunjonov first came to conflict with the Uzbek authorities in 1998 when he questioned President Islam Karimov about the detention of journalist [Pulat Gadoev](#), arrested that year (subsequently freed in 1999). As a result he was banned from presidential press conferences.

In 1999, he was briefly detained and subsequently charged with bribery, charges he says were aimed at intimidating him for his critical reporting.

In June 2012, he reported on allegations that fraud charges against a well-known Uzbekistani martial arts champion had been falsified. He first received a warning from his employers to stop critical reporting, and was then called to the offices of the security services and advised to, as he reports, 'behave well' and to 'think about the future of my children'. There then followed a complaint to his employer accusing Akhunjonov of accepting bribes three years earlier in 2009 and he was subsequently charged with three counts of fraud. He was warned not to leave Tashkent. Akhunjonov maintains that the charges are false. There is a pattern of politically-motivated fraud charges being brought against Uzbekistani dissidents, such as in the case of Pulat Gadoev, referred to above.

In July 2012 Akhunjonov was again called for questioning by security services about his support for [two colleagues](#) from the national television and radio broadcaster who had in 2011 been fired from the station.

After receiving threats, and concerned that he would be imprisoned imminently, Akhunjonov fled Uzbekistan for Turkey with his family in November 2013.

The situation for Uzbekistani refugees in Turkey is not safe, suffering threats and intimidation from Uzbekistani intelligence officers based there. For example an Uzbekistani dissident, [Abdullah Bukhari](#), was murdered in Istanbul in December 2014 with Uzbekistani and Russian intelligence agencies suspected of his killing. One of Akhunjonov's referees, a member of Reporters Without Borders, reports that Akhunjonov told him that in October 2014, security officials had visited the home of his relatives in Tashkent, and obtained his telephone and other contact details in Turkey. He also said that subsequently he has been

followed, unknown persons have knocked on their door at night, and that he has received threatening anonymous calls. The UNHCR advised Akhunjonov to report the threats to Turkish police, which he did but he says that his complaint has been ignored.

PEN International considers journalists and poets Narzullo Akhunjonov and Shamsiya Khudaynazarova to be at grave risk of arrest or other persecution in Uzbekistan. We therefore consider that they have a legitimate right to protection under the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. It is clear that their safety cannot be assured in Turkey, and PEN urges that they are prioritised for UN resettlement in a safe third country.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information on this case.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R. Cacchioli', is displayed on a light blue rectangular background.

Romana Cacchioli
Director, International Programmes

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