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KAZAKSTAN

Opposition members imprisoned as presidential campaign gets underway

Amnesty International is concerned that the three-day administrative detention sentences handed down yesterday on two opposition leaders may be an attempt to punish them for their political opposition to the Kazak government and to dissuade them from campaigning in the forthcoming presidential elections.

Petr Svoik, co-chairman of the opposition Azamat movement, and Mels Yeleusizov, leader of an environmental movement, were reportedly charged with holding an unauthorized meeting on 2 October under the auspices of an organization called "For Fair Elections in Kazakstan". Two others, including the leader of a pensioners' movement, were fined.

Last week the Kazak parliament adopted constitutional amendments prolonging the presidential term in office and removing restrictions both on the president's age and his eligibility to run for office more than twice. On 8 October parliament approved bringing forward presidential elections from December 2000 to January 1999.

In a press conference on 9 October Petr Svoik and other Azamat leaders were reported to have questioned the legitimacy of parliament's actions.

Last year, Petr Svoik was reportedly beaten by masked men while in Kyrgyzstan to speak about the political opposition movement in Kazakstan at an international conference.

Earlier this year he defended in court Madel Ismailov, chairman of the opposition Workers' Movement of Kazakstan, who at the time of the presidential elections will still be serving a one-year prison sentence for "insulting the honour and dignity of the President" and is considered by Amnesty International to be a prisoner of conscience. ENDS.../