Crimean Tatar Journalists Osman Arifmemetov, Remzi Bekirov and Rustem Sheikhaliev Detained by Russian Authorities

On 27 March 2019, officers of the Russian Federation's Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Ministry of the Interior, and the National Guard raided the homes of freelance journalist Osman Arifmemetov and of Remzi Bekirov, a correspondent with the independent Russian news website “Grani”, along with the homes of nearly two dozen other ethnic Crimean Tatars in Simferopol and several districts in Crimea, according to media reports. Absent from home at the time of the raid, Arifmemetov and Bekirov were arrested later that day in Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, according to “Grani”, the Ukraine-based Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG), and Crimean Solidarity, a group that assists Crimean political prisoners by publicising their prosecution and advocating for their release. Another freelance journalist, Rustem Sheikhaliev, was arrested that day in Simferopol, according to the Lviv Media Forum, a group of Ukrainian media professionals.

Arifmemetov, Bekirov and Sheikhaliev posted livestreamed raids and trials on Crimean Solidarity’s YouTube channel, according to Krym.Realii (Crimea Realities) and a CPJ review of the videos. On 21 February 2017, Arifmemetov and Bekirov had been arrested while livestreaming the raid on the home of Crimean Tatar activist Marlen Mustafaev in Simferopol, and sentenced to five days of administrative arrest, according to the Ukraine-based Crimean Human Rights Group (CHRG) and the independent Ukrainian news outlet Hromadske.

After their arrest, Arifmemetov and Bekirov were beaten to the point when Arifmemetov fainted, according to KHPG. They were given no food in the 24 hours after their detention and only limited access to water. On 28 March 2019, they were transferred to Simferopol, according to “Grani”. Arifmemetov, Bekirov and Sheikhaliev were prosecuted for supporting “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, according to the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti – an Islamist group.
that operates legally in Ukraine, but is considered a terrorist organisation in the Russian Federation, according Freedom House’s 2019 “Freedom in the World” report. They face charges of “organising the activities of a terrorist organisation” and, if convicted, up to 20 years in prison, according to KHPG and the Russian human rights organisation “Memorial”.

Sheikhaliev's son, Dzhelyal Sheikhaliev, said in a video posted on Crimean Solidarity's YouTube channel that on 27 March 2019, the investigators first handcuffed the journalist and then searched his and his parents' neighbouring house, without a lawyer or any supervision. Dzhelyal Sheikhaliev said the officers “brought two witnesses with them and did not allow any other people as witnesses,” seizing cell phones and a Russian translation of the Quran. Arifmemetov's home was raided and searched when no one was there, his wife, Aliye Nejmedinova, told CHRG. She said that the hard disk of her husband's computer had been taken and that literature the investigators later claimed to have found had been planted. In Bekirov's absence, books the officers later claimed to have found had been planted, his wife, Khalide Bekirova, told Human Rights Watch (HRW). According to KHPG, previous trials of ethnic Crimean Tatars charged for alleged links to “Hizb ut-Tahrir” were “flawed”, and involved “secret witnesses” and falsified evidence.

On 18 April 2019, Arifmemetov's father-in-law organised a protest, calling the charges "unlawful" and describing the situation in Crimea as "lawlessness." On 24 May 2019, “Grani” issued a statement saying that Bekirov was one of the reporters who covered “never-ending searches, arrests and trials on fabricated charges” since “Crimea, after annexation, has turned into an information black hole.” Bekirov, along with Arifmemetov and Sheikhalilov, had become “dazzling professionals in a short period of time and, of course, themselves ended up under attack.”

On 29 March 2019, two dozen Crimean Tatar detainees, including Arifmemetov and Bekirov, were flown out to Rostov-on-Don, according to KHPG. Their families were not notified. On 5 September 2019, Arifmemetov, Bekirov and Sheikhaliev were transferred to a pretrial detention facility in Krasnodar, Russian Federation, according to Crimean Solidarity. Bekirov and Sheikhaliev were placed in punishment cells for their alleged “inclination to spread extremism” among inmates, according to a Facebook post based on a narrative received later from Bekirov, where standing up straight or laying down to sleep was impossible. The journalists were transferred later to a pretrial detention centre in Simferopol. In October 2019, Arifmemetov was placed in solitary confinement for five days for violating internal prison rules, his lawyer Aleksey Ladin told Krym.Realii. Lawyer Emine Avamileva visited Sheikhaliev for the first time on 6 November 2019, according to Crimean Solidarity. She said the journalist did not complain about his health, but the detention centre denied her request to give the journalist medicine and an authorised translation of the Quran. Lawyer Edem Semedlyaev, who coordinates the work of other lawyers in the case, told Krym.Realii that inmates did not receive food on trial days.

On 12 November 2019, at a court hearing in Simferopol, Arifmemetov denied the charges,
saying his detention was illegal and calling his “forced removal” a “deportation” similar to the one of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, according to Crimean Solidarity. The court extended Arifmemetov’s pre-trial detention until 15 February 2020.

On CPJ's phone request for information, the duty officer at the Federal Ministry of the Interior's Simferopol branch refused to provide information on detainees in Crimea, saying that “only authorities in Moscow can comment on these cases.” CPJ did not receive a reply to an email request for comment from the Federal Ministry of the Interior’s central office in Moscow.

The Russian Federation has been enforcing its laws in Crimea since March 2014, including substantial restrictions on media freedom, according to Freedom House's 2019 “Freedom in the World” report. Under a registration process with the Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor, the number of media outlets in Crimea has been reduced by more than 90%, and Russian authorities have restricted access to Ukrainian TV and other media outlets. Many members of Crimea's indigenous ethnic Crimean Tatar population, a Muslim minority, have openly opposed Russia’s occupation, according to Krym.Realii, Freedom House and HRW.

NEW 18 Feb 2020: Rüstem Seythalilov's, Osman Arifmemetov's and Remzi Bekirov's pre-trial detention was extended until 15 March 2020.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- CPJ's annual report on jailed journalists 2019 : Osman Arifmemetov
- CPJ's annual report on jailed journalists 2019 : Rustem Sheikhaliev
- CPJ's annual report on jailed journalists 2019 : Remzi Bekirov

FOLLOW-UPS

OSCE 20 Dec 2019 | OSCE Media Freedom Representative condemns arrest of citizen journalists in Crimea, calls for their immediate release.

- Statement by Harlem Désir

FREELANCERS
Key information:
Osman Arifmemetov, Remzi Bekirov, Rustem Sheikhaliev

JOURNALISTS IN DETENTION

Currently in detention (3):
Osman Arifmemetov; Remzi Bekirov; Rustem Sheikhaliev