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Kyrgyzstan: Women human rights defenders Klara Sooronkulova, Rita Karasartova, Gulnara Dzhurabayeva and Asya Sasykbayeva to remain in pre-trial detention until 20 December 2022

On 11 November 2022, Bishkek City Court rejected the appeal to change the interim measure from detention to house arrest for woman human rights defenders Klara Sooronkulova and Asya Sasykbayeva. The same occurred on 10 November 2022 for woman human rights defender Rita Karasartova, and on 9 November 2022 for woman human rights defender Gulnara Dzhurabayeva.

Klara Sooronkulova is a woman human rights defenders, chairwoman of the NGO “School of Law” and a chairwoman of the Committee to Protect Political Prisoners. WHRD carries out out systematic monitoring of trials of political prisoners, work on the issues of freedom of speech, judicial reforms, and corruption. She vocally opposed laws on social media censorship and the Russia copy-cat foreign agents law.

Rita Karasartova is a woman human rights defender and an expert in civic governance. She works for the Institute of Civic Analysis, a human rights organization and a think tank. The organization works to monitor the selection and rotation process within the Kyrgyzstani judiciary system. The woman human rights defender also supports provides independent legal expertese to the local participatory governments. Rita Karasartova is one of the first women human rights defenders, who started publically covering issues within in the law enforcement and judiciary systems in Kyrgyz language.

Gulnara Jurabayeva is a woman human rights defender, who collaborated with “Interbilim” since 2020, and Asya Sasykbayeva is a founder and ex-head of human rights organization “Interbilim.” Interbilim is an organization that is set out to promote the creation and effective functioning of democratic institutions, ensuring democratic governance, and transparency of the state system through the mechanisms of public examination and monitoring of the activities of state bodies.

The women human rights defenders appealed the decision of the Pervomayskii District Court of the City of Bishkek on 25 October 2022 to detain them for 2 months for their peaceful protest against the transferring the ownership of the Kempir-Abad water reserve from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. Klara Sooronkulova, Asya Sasykbayeva, Rita Karasartova, and Gulnara Dzhurabayeva will remain in detention until 20 December 2022. The women human rights defenders are being accused of conspiring to organize mass riots, a criminal offense envisioned by Article 36-278 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. If charged, the women human rights defenders can face up to 10 years of prison time. The Court refused to take into account that two women human rights defenders have young children and two women human rights defenders are over 60 years old. Some of their colleagues, who are detained in Temporary Isolation Ward #1 of the City of Bishkek, report that the detention conditions are very poor and the incarceration units lack proper heating.

On 24 October 2022, Kyrgyzstani law enforcement officers arbitrary arrested and detained women human rights defenders Gulnara Dzhurabayeva, Klara Sooronkulova, Rita Karasartova, and Asya Sasykbayeva for their peaceful protest against the transferring the ownership of the Kempir-Abad water reserve from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. They were among 24 other activists and representatives of political parties, who peacefully opposed the transferring of the Kempir-Abad water reserve to Uzbekistan, stating that Kempir-Abad is an important source of pottable water for the local communities, and that the transferring of the reservoir to Uzbekistan will affect local farmers who will be forcefully displaced in Uzbekistan.

On 22 October 2022, human rights defenders, local activists, journalists, and political actors established a Committee to protect the Kempir-Abad in opposing the transferring of the water reservoir from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. The Committee was set up as a result of public convening of local communities dwelling the premises of the Kempir-Abad on 15 October 2022, where representatives of the local communities called upon the Kyrgyztani government to stop the transferring of the water reservoir and the exchange of territories between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. On 21 October 2022, in Uzgen District of the Osh region, representatives of the local communities affected by the transferring of the Kempir-Abad reserve from villages of Kurshab and Kyzyl-Oktyabr held a peaceful march.

On 23 October 2022, premises of homes of representatives of the Committee to Protect Kempir-Abad in Bishkek and Osh were raided by various Ministry of Interior authorities, and personal equipment was ceised during the raids. On 24 October 2022, twenty-four representatives of the Committee, including women human rights defenders Gulnara Dzhurabayeva, Klara Sooronkulova, Rita Karasartova, and Asya Sasykbayeva, were arbitrary detained and on 25 October 2022, sentenced to 2 months of pre-trial detention.

Front Line Defenders is gravely concerned about the detention of women human rights defenders Klara Sooronkulova, Asya Sasykbayeva, Rita Karasartova, and Gulnara Dzhurabayeva and considers this detention as a retaliation against their peaceful human rights work and public criticism of the decision to transfer the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. The detention of the women human rights defenders is part of the escalating persecution of human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan and their increasing censorship.

Front Line Defenders calls upon the Kyrgyzstan authorities to:

1. Immediately release women human rights defenders Klara Sooronkulova, Asya Sasykbayeva, Rita Karasartova, and Gulnara Dzhurabayeva from custody and ensure the protection of thier physical and psychological integrity;
2. Drop all charges against women human rights defenders Klara Sooronkulova, Asya Sasykbayeva, Rita Karasartova, and Gulnara Dzhurabayeva as they are solely motivated by thier legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
3. Cease the acts of censorship and judicial harrasment against human rights defenders and journalists that are currently escalating in Kyrgyzstan;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.