

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office
First Floor, Avoca Court
Temple Road, Blackrock
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750
fax +353 1 212 1001

BRUSSELS

Front Line Defenders – EU Office
Square Marie-Louise 72
1000 Brussels
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383
fax +32 2 230 0028

7 May 2024

Uzbekistan: Defamation attack against women human rights defenders Umida Niyazova and Sharifa Madrakhimova

On 30 April 2024, a pro-government blogger published a defamatory YouTube video targeting **Umida Niyazova**, a prominent woman human rights defender. Earlier, on 18 April, the same blogger, accompanied by an unidentified man, ambushed Umida Niyazova and fellow woman human rights defender **Sharifa Madrakhimova** outside Madrakhimova's home in the Fergana region.

[Umida Niyazova](#) is an Uzbekistani woman human rights defender who fled Uzbekistan in 2008 after serving four months in prison on charges related to her human rights work. Now a German citizen, she continues to travel to Uzbekistan to document and monitor labor rights issues. Umida Niyazova is the director and founder of the [Uzbek Forum for Human Rights](#), an organization in exile in Germany focusing on human rights and labor rights violations in Uzbekistan. This organization, a frontline partner of the Cotton Campaign, has been monitoring the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan since 2010, along with the impact of agricultural reforms on farmers.

[Sharifa Madrakhimova](#) is an Uzbekistani woman human rights defender, journalist, and respected community leader from the Fergana region. As a freelance reporter, she collaborates with various media outlets in Uzbekistan.

The defamatory YouTube video, titled "[YouTube video titled "How much does it cost to attack Uzbekistan, Ms. Umida Niyazova?"](#)", accused Niyazova of systematically lying about human rights and labor rights in Uzbekistan. The pro-governmental blogger threatened Niyazova with a broader defamation campaign, suggesting that she was funded by so-called "Western powers" to discredit Uzbekistan. The video further accused exiled Uzbekistani human rights organizations of spreading disinformation about the country's human rights situation.

Earlier in April, Umida Niyazova and Sharifa Madrakhimova were in Uzbekistan to meet with farmers and cotton company representatives. On 18 April, the pro-government blogger and an unidentified man harassed and threatened them outside Sharifa Madrakhimova's home in the Fergana region. The two men intimidated, insulted and accused Umida Niyazova of organizing media attacks against Uzbekistan, which became a central theme in the defamatory video published later that month on 30 April. The blogger's companion filmed the entire encounter, and the women human rights defenders believed they were under surveillance, as the blogger knew their exact location and future travel plans.

The women human rights defenders unsuccessfully attempted to escape the harassment by getting into their car, but the blogger and his companion physically intimidated them by preventing the car door from closing. Ultimately, they managed to drive away, but the incident prompted them to cut short their travels due to safety concerns.

On 19 April 2024, Sharifa Madrakhimova reported the attack to the Uchkuprik District Police Department, naming the pro-government blogger as one of the perpetrators. However, on 28 April 2024, law enforcement concluded that they found no wrongdoing on the blogger's part. On 30 April 2024, two days later, the defamatory video was published on YouTube.

The [Cotton Campaign](#), a coalition advocating for labor rights and the end of forced labor in Central Asia, reported similar incidents where human rights defenders, as [independent monitors and workers](#), have faced harassment, threats, and travel restrictions. Their [statement](#) cites an incident in which law enforcement officers summoned and interrogated a farmer from the Kasbi district of Kashkadarya, Uzbekistan, accusing him of engaging in actions that are "harmful to Uzbekistan." Moreover, in January 2024, an official from the Ministry of Internal Affairs threatened an Uzbek Forum monitor with criminal charges and warned that the monitor's life was in danger for engaging with farmworkers at the cotton company Indorama Agro and reporting on labor rights violations there. In August 2023, the authorities prevented another human rights defender working with the Uzbek Forum for Human Rights from traveling to participate in labor rights training; the district police seized their passport. It was released only after the scheduled travel date had passed.

Front Line Defenders condemns the attack and subsequent defamation against Umida Niyazova and Sharifa Madrakhimova. The organization believes that these women human rights defenders were targeted because of their legitimate human rights work, focusing on labor rights violations. Front Line Defenders expresses serious concerns about the harassment of human rights defenders working on labour rights, which contributes to a chilling effect, deterring human rights defenders from carrying out their vital work in Uzbekistan.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Uzbekistan to:

1. Publicly condemn the defamation attack against Umida Niyazova and the intimidation against both Umida Niyazova and Sharifa Madrakhimova;
2. Conduct an immediate investigation into the attack, acknowledging its probable link to the women human rights defenders' human rights work, and publish the results with a view to holding those responsible accountable;
3. Ensure the physical and psychological safety of Umida Niyazova and Sharifa Madrakhimova;
4. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Uzbekistan can pursue their legitimate work without fear of reprisal or judicial harassment.