

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Timothy Frye, Director

Columbia University 420 West 118th Street, New York, NY 10027 <http://www.harriman.columbia.edu>

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Kazakh Torture Victim and Activist Speaks Out Against Torture at the Harriman Institute

On June 3, 2011, the Harriman Institute hosted the Kazakh anti-torture activist Petr Afanasenko. Afanasenko began his activism career after he was arrested and subjected to a 48-hour period of non-stop physical and psychological torture in 1999. At the time of his arrest, he was a bodyguard to former Kazakh Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, an opponent of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The authorities were trying to use torture in order to coerce Afanasenko to incriminate his former boss, who had dared to challenge President Nursultan Nazarbayev during the 1997 presidential elections, and was subsequently hounded into exile with the help of the then all-powerful son-in-law of the President, Mr. Rakhat Aliev.

After his release in 1999, Afanasenko was soon sentenced to 3 ½ years on charges of “illegal possession of firearms” and “plotting an armed coup.” In 2001, having served a year and 8 months of his term, he was released in response to a wave of international criticism, which included statements by members of U.S. Congress and a mention in the State Department’s annual human rights country report. In 2003, with his career in tatters and no job prospects in sight, he fled into exile in Belgium, where he has been living ever since, recently assuming Belgian citizenship.

Just a few weeks ago, Afanasenko brought a civil lawsuit against Rakhat Aliev, the man he claims personally ordered the non-stop 48-hour round of physical and psychological torture to which he was subjected during his detention. Aliev fell from grace in Kazakhstan in 2007, and was granted asylum in Austria. Afanasenko filed the lawsuit in Vienna’s 1st

District Court. Mindful of Austria’s refusal to extradite Aliev, Afanasenko has urged the Austrian government to try Aliev in its own courts under the universal jurisdiction of the UN Convention Against Torture.

At the Harriman Institute, Afanasenko recounted in shocking detail the painful episode of his incarceration, the threats made against his two teenage daughters and his wife, and the loss of his lifetime career and future job prospects in Kazakhstan. He further noted the irony of both the victim and the perpetrator enjoying the same privileges of asylum in EU member states. He ended his presentation by emphasizing that while one of the lawsuit’s objectives is to seek material compensation for his physical and mental distress and loss of employment, the overall goal is to send a message to power-abusing officials and torturers in Kazakhstan and around the world.