

Uzbekistan jails AIDS advocate over work: activists

Contributed by Master
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ALMATY : An AIDS activist in Uzbekistan has been sentenced to seven years in prison for writing a brochure that authorities said would promote antisocial behaviour, activists said Thursday.

Maxim Popov was convicted last September, his colleagues told AFP, but his case only came to light this week after US-based watchdog Human Rights Watch asked local activists to investigate his situation.

"Maxim Popov was convicted for writing a brochure which was funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS and UNICEF as an effort by international donor organisations to raise awareness about the disease in the country," said an AIDS activist who worked with Popov.

Prosecutors argued that the brochure, which called for the use of condoms during sex and sterile needles when injecting drugs, was promoting immoral behaviour, the activist said.

The court ordered the brochure incinerated and barred from circulation, said the activist, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation by Uzbek authorities.

The brochure explained the use of condoms in detail, a sensitive topic for Uzbekistan, a largely Muslim country which publicly condemns pre-marital and extra-marital sex.

Uzbek prosecutors would not confirm the sentencing. Officials in the former Soviet republic rarely give public comments about politically sensitive cases and many trials are held behind closed doors.

A spokesman for the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Tashkent could not immediately be reached for comment.

Ruled for two decades by strongman President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan is a frequent target of criticism from human rights groups who accuse the Uzbek authorities of torturing prisoners and tolerating little dissent.

The regime argues that its tough policing techniques are necessary to protect the secular government from Islamist militants.

The most populous state in Central Asia, Uzbekistan has at least 16,000 people living with HIV, according to the most recently available report from UNAIDS, the joint UN programme on AIDS.

Authorities have long been suspicious that foreign aid organizations have been trying to spread homosexuality and drug use, said another activist who also requested anonymity.

"I think they made Popov a scapegoat," he said.