

Uzbek Pastor Released From Kazakhstan Prison, Reunited With Family

According to Open Doors News, Uzbek pastor Makset Djabbarbergenov has been released from prison in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

He was released on Tuesday and taken to the airport, where he was reunited with his wife and four children. According to the Norwegian **religious freedom** watchdog agency Forum 18, they were flown to Germany. After arrival at Frankfurt, they were taken to a safe location in an unnamed European country.

His friends in Almaty told Forum 18, "We need to thank the Kazakh government; they did the right thing."

Border guards at Almaty airport told Djabbarbergenov as he left that he was banned from re-entering Kazakhstan until 2017, according to Open Doors News.

The pastor's release and asylum in Europe was facilitated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Commissioner (UNHCR) representatives met him on release from prison, took him directly to the airport and saw him safely through passport control to ensure there were no last-minute problems.

Almost 3,800 supporters sent emails on behalf of Djabbarbergenov through an advocacy campaign launched by Open Doors USA.

"We are incredibly grateful for Makset's release and thank all of our supporters who advocated on his behalf by sending emails to the Kazakh ambassador to the United States," says Open Doors USA Advocacy Director Lindsay Vessey. "It is good

to hear that the UNHCR played a critical role in securing his release as well as in ensuring Makset's safe departure from Kazakhstan with his family."

Djabbarbergenov was arrested in Almaty on Sept. 5 on the request of his native Uzbekistan, which wanted him to be returned to face charges that he practiced religion outside state regulation.

Djabbarbergenov became a Christian in 2000 and soon became an active church leader in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan, the autonomous republic of Uzbekistan. At present, no Protestant church in Karakalpakstan has an official registration as they are considered illegal.

He was arrested six times and, following a police raid on his apartment in 2007, he and his family fled to Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. He crossed into Kazakhstan the following month. His family followed a few months later, according to Open Doors News.

Djabbarbergenov applied for asylum in Kazakhstan but, despite the fact that the commissioner for refugees said he would face prosecution in Uzbekistan because of his Christian faith, the Kazakh government ruled against Djabbarbergenov at several turns. Finally he was arrested in September and held in prison, pending deportation.

His wife, Aigul, spoke to Open Doors during that period. "Pray that we can follow God and He'll lead us to be where He wants us to be. We want Him to solve and resolve the situation and tell us what to do."

Uzbekistan is ranked No. 7 on the 2012 Open Doors World Watch List of 50 of the worst persecutors of Christians.