

BBC Reporter 'Tortured'

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — The lawyer for a BBC reporter on trial in Tajikistan for allegedly belonging to a banned radical Islamist group said Monday that her client was tortured shortly after his detention in June.

Fayzinisso Vokhidova said that security services officers beat up veteran BBC Central Asia service journalist Uronboi Usmonov and stubbed out cigarettes on his wrists.

"I have not talked about this before at the request of my client. He was frightened and forbade me from speaking out. He was afraid that things would become worse," Vokhidova said.

State Committee National Security spokesman Nozirdzhon Buriyev said no official comment will be made about the claims.

Usmonov's trial began last week in the northern city of Khujand.

The BBC says the charges against Usmonov are unfounded and that any meetings he had with members of the militant group Hizb ut-Tahrir were for journalistic purposes. Usmonov has worked for the broadcaster for the past 10 years.

The reporter's family said he went missing on June 13 but then returned home a day later accompanied by security service officials. Family members said he appeared to have been beaten up.

"When security service officials searched Usmonov's house, he told people close to him that if he were to endure another night of the same treatment, he would not be able to take it any longer," Vokhidova said.

She added that authorities have taken no action to investigate how Usmonov sustained the visible injuries on his face and hands.

Tajikistan, which lies on Afghanistan's northern border, is taking increasingly strict measures to stamp out all signs of radical Islam. But government critics say heavy-handed efforts to arrest members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other similar radical organizations have only served to drive the groups further underground.

Some 150 Hizb ut-Tahrir members were jailed in Tajikistan last year, and several dozen members have faced the same fate so far this year.

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