



IHF Intervention to the 2006 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

WORKING SESSION 4: TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION I:

Women in Conflict Prevention

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The Precarious Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan¹

Human rights protection is a major mechanism of conflict prevention and resolution and is a key element of any democratic society. Human rights defenders therefore have a particularly important role to play in countries that are in transition to democracy, such as the countries of the former Soviet Union. However, human rights defenders working in this region often do so at great risk to themselves and their families and nowhere in the region are human rights defenders more endangered than in Uzbekistan. Most worrisome, in the recent period, women human rights defenders have become increasingly vulnerable to persecution in this country.²

In the aftermath of the May 2005 events in the Uzbek city of Andijan, when police and security forces massacred hundreds of civilians peacefully protesting government policies, human rights defenders and other civil society activists have been the targets of an unprecedented clampdown in Uzbekistan. Apparently fearful of political upheavals of the kind that recently have taken place in other countries of the former Soviet Union, the Uzbek authorities have stepped up their efforts to silence dissident voices and human rights activists, journalists and others critical of official policies have been labeled “traitors” and “enemies of the country” and become subject to wide-scale repression.

Many women in Uzbekistan are involved in human rights activities. In the post-Andijan period these women have become a particular target of harassment and abuse, including intimidation, surveillance, detention, politically motivated charges and physical attacks. In numerous cases, women human rights defenders have been placed under house arrest for up to several weeks, during which time they have been under constant surveillance and not allowed to go anywhere. The Soviet-era technique of forcibly detaining dissidents in psychiatric hospitals has also been used repeatedly against women human rights defenders and political activists.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this intervention is based on information from the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), an IHF cooperating organization, to the IHF. See also the IHF publications *Uzbekistan: Women human rights defenders being forcibly detained in psychiatric hospitals*, 28 March 2006, http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4220; *The Assault on Human Rights Defenders in the Russian Federation, Belarus and Uzbekistan – Restrictive Legislation and Bad Practices*, 29 March 2006, http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4221; and “Uzbekistan: Human Rights Defenders in Danger,” 9 June 2006, http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4256

² See also the IHF intervention on human right defenders in general, p. 30.

These are some cases of persecution of women HR defenders that have been reported in the aftermath of the Andijan events:

- **Mutabar Tadjibaeva**, chairperson of the human rights organization Fiery Hearts Club in the Ferghana Valley, is currently serving a sentence in a Tashkent prison on apparently politically motivated charges. Tadjibaeva was arrested in October 2005, the day before she was due to travel to Ireland to participate in an international conference for human rights defenders, and accused inter alia of “anti-government activity” and attempting to “disrupt public order.” Prior to her arrest, Tadjibaeva had actively been involved in human rights monitoring and reporting and had publicly spoken out against repressive government measures taken in the wake of the Andijan events. In March 2006, she was sentenced to eight years in prison in a process that she described as “puppet theater.”³ During her imprisonment, she has reportedly been subjected to psychiatric treatment.³
- **Nadira Khidoyatova**, a coordinator of the opposition movement Sunny Coalition, was arrested in December 2005 when she returned to Uzbekistan from Russia, where she had openly criticized Uzbekistan’s repressive economic policies and its actions in Andijan. In a March 2006 trial deemed to be politically motivated by human rights groups, Khidoyatova was found guilty of fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion and other economic crimes and sentenced to ten years in prison. The verdict was upheld on appeal in May 2006, but the appeal courts changed her sentence to a suspended one of seven years in prison with three years of probation and ordered her release. Invoking a process that allows for handing down milder sentences in return for economic compensation by the defendant, the court requested Khidoyatova to pay a total of about €80,000 to the state.⁴
- **Lydia Volkobraun**, a 69-year-old human rights activist who has written numerous complaints about unlawful action by police, was arrested in Tashkent in March 2006 and forcibly placed in psychiatric care. She was subsequently released. In 2004 Volkobraun was forcibly detained in a psychiatric hospital on two occasions.
- **Imamova Munozhaat**, a member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) in the province of Dhizak, was detained and beaten in August 2005 when she was on her way to a meeting with the chair of the HRSU branch in the city of Dhizak. As a result of the beating, she lost her child – she was three months pregnant when she was attacked – and needed medical treatment for a long period of time. Following the attack, she has repeatedly been placed under home arrest and police regularly request reports about her movements and her meetings with different people.
- **Elena Urlaeva**, one of the most prominent human rights activists in Uzbekistan, has been subjected to various forms of harassment, including police surveillance, house arrests and arbitrary detention. In October 2005 she was arrested for disseminating leaflets of the opposition party Ozod Dekhonlar and posting a caricature of the Uzbek state symbol and, even though a psychiatric commission declared her sane, she was ordered by court to undergo forcible psychiatric treatment involving the administration of powerful

³ See also Human Rights Watch, “Uzbekistan: Rights Defender Sentenced in ‘Puppet Theater’,” 7 March 2006, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/03/07/uzbeki12763.htm>; and Amnesty International, “Uzbekistan Appeal Case Update: Mutabar Tadjibaeva – Human Rights Defenders,” 6 March 2006, <http://news.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR620042006?open&of=ENG-346>.

⁴ *Ferghana.ru*, “Uzbekistan. Sunny Coalition Coordinator Nadira Khidoyatova set free for a ‘ransom’ amounting to \$100,000,” 23 May 2006, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1441>.

psychotropic drugs. Already in 2002 she was forcibly detained in a psychiatric institution on two occasions, for a total of six months. This time Urlaeva was released after ten days but she has subsequently been placed under house arrest on several occasions. A number of other cases of harassment targeting Urlaeva have also been reported in 2006: in January she was briefly detained in connection with a picket in Tashkent, in July her apartment was raided by police, and in September law enforcement authorities prevented her from participating in a meeting between the German ambassador to Uzbekistan and human rights organizations by driving her around in a car for several hours.

The cases just highlighted, as well as other similar cases, are most disturbing and show that women human rights defenders and political activists in Uzbekistan are greatly endangered and in urgent need of support from the international community.

Recommendations

1. To the government of **Uzbekistan**:

- Publicly recognize its obligation to respect the right of its citizens to “contribute actively, individually or in association with others, to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” and to refrain from imposing any restrictions on human rights activity that are not consistent with international law;
- Immediately release all civil society activists who have been detained because of legitimate human rights work or criticism of official policies and ensure that no one is prosecuted, imprisoned or forcefully confined in a psychiatric institution merely for exercising her right to freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms;
- Put an end to all forms of surveillance and restrictions on the freedom of movement of human rights defenders and others involved in efforts to promote government compliance with international human rights standards and ensure that all reported cases of attacks against human rights defenders are investigated in a prompt, thorough and objective manner and that those guilty of such attacks are brought to justice.

2. To the **OSCE**:

- In bilateral and multilateral contacts with the Uzbek government, emphasize the important role of independent human rights defenders and other civil society activists in the democratic development of any country and bring up for discussion reported cases of harassment and abuse against Uzbek human rights defenders;
- Support the work of civil society groups in Uzbekistan in financial and other ways and take concrete measures, where appropriate, to protect persecuted Uzbek human rights defenders, e.g. by providing for temporary resettlement in emergency cases;
- Encourage the Uzbek government to cooperate with the UN special procedures (in particular the Special Rapporteur on torture and the Special Representative of the Secretary General on the situation of human rights defenders) and extend to them an invitation to visit the country.