

2017 OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING, WARSAW

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WRITTEN STATEMENT IN WORKING SESSION 17:

Fundamental freedoms II, including: Freedom of movement

21 September 2017

In August 2017, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoev, signed a decree abolishing the legal requirement for nationals of Uzbekistan to apply for and obtain permission to travel abroad before leaving the country. It is due to come into force on 1 January 2019. The use of these so-called exit visas is an archaic Soviet-era practice that has long-ago been abolished elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

An unofficial black list allegedly kept by the authorities of those individuals banned from travelling abroad has posed persistent problems in recent years for human rights defenders, political opposition activists and anyone who openly criticizes or is perceived to criticize or question the authorities in Uzbekistan, who have had their right to freedom of movement restricted.

The Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, International Partnership for Human Rights and Amnesty International welcome the commitment of the Uzbekistani authorities to rescind this restrictive requirement, however, the organizations are concerned that ongoing travel restrictions on individuals who have previously been critical of the government have not been lifted.

For example, human rights lawyer, **Polina Brauner**, who was wheelchair-bound and suffered from serious long-term medical conditions lodged several applications over the last three years to travel abroad for medical treatment, none of which were successful. When she complained to the Prosecutor's Office about this, the authorities pressured her to withdraw the complaint. In February 2017, she again applied for an exit visa and was again refused. Meanwhile, Polina Brauner's health continued to deteriorate, and she tragically died on 19 May 2017.

Murad Djuraev, who was released in November 2015 after 21 years in prison on politically-motivated grounds, is in need of urgent spinal surgery which he could have in Germany, but he has been refused permission to leave the country. In June this year his wife wrote to the President, explaining that his application for permission to travel has been under consideration by the local OVIR office (Office of Visa and Registration) since 24 April 2017. Djuraev was then summoned to a police station where an officer told him about a Ministry of Interior order stating that those previously convicted of serious crimes will only be allowed to travel abroad after 15 years post release, and not after one year as stated in legislation.

Former Editor-in-Chief of the opposition newspaper *Erk*, **Muhammad Bekjanov**, who was released in February 2017 after spending 17 years in prison, requires urgent medical treatment as his health is very poor: he suffers from tuberculosis, an inguinal hernia and has lost most of his teeth. Bekjanov has not yet applied for an exit visa to travel abroad for medical treatment, as a local police officer told him that persons under administrative supervision are not allowed to travel abroad. Bekjanov's wife and children live in the United States and he has not seen his children for 19 years and has never met his grandchildren. He currently lives with his brother in the Aral Sea region and must register with the police every ten days and receives regular visits from law enforcement officials. Since giving an interview to an independent online publication on his experiences under investigation and in detention, his mobile and internet lines have been regularly cut off.

In addition, writer and human rights defender **Mamadali Makhmudov**, who was released from prison in 2014 after serving a 14-year prison sentence handed down on politically-motivated grounds, has not been granted an exit visa since June 2016 and has not been allowed to leave the country. Mamadali Makhmudov has heart, stomach (ulcer) and kidney (stones) problems and needs pacemaker fitted.

We urge the Uzbekistani authorities to immediately lift travel restrictions on individuals previously imprisoned on politically motivated grounds, in particular on Murad Djuraev, Muhammad Bekjanov and Mamadali Makhmudov, and ensure that they are allowed to travel abroad for urgent medical treatment.