



2012 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Written Intervention by the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan, International Partnership for Human Rights and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee

Working Session 1 (Fundamental Freedoms I), Monday 24 September 2012:

Intolerance of freedom of expression in Uzbekistan

Freedom of expression continues to be seriously restricted in Uzbekistan.

State TV and radio, as well as state newspapers praise the achievements of the head of the state and the government and paint rosy pictures of the well-being and standard of living of the population. Programs that present world news are censored and provide only selective coverage.

Internet use is monitored and restricted. Online material on controversial issues, such as corruption, human rights violations and religion is filtered and websites featuring criticism of the authorities are fully or partially blocked.¹

Independent journalists and human rights defenders who criticize authorities continue to be subjected to persecution. Since the beginning of this year, among others, the following cases have been reported:

- On 25 July, human rights defender Akromkhodzha Mukhitdinov, known in particular for his defense of the rights of farmers and entrepreneurs, died of stab wounds in the Yangiyulsky district of the Tashkent region. It was reported that a number of men provoked a fight with him in the center of the settlement where he lived. A while later, as he was entering a local store, the same men re-appeared and attacked him, including by repeatedly stabbing him, as a result of which he died on the way to hospital. Four suspects were soon arrested, but three of them were later released.²

Mukhitdinov's colleagues suspect that the attack on him was related to his human rights activities. They have also expressed concern about the investigation of the attack, which they feel is not being conducted adequately.

- On 10 July, member of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) Gul'naza Juldashaeva was convicted of extortion (under article 165 of the Criminal Code) in a case that appeared to have been initiated in retaliation for her efforts to bring attention to suspected human trafficking cases involving local officials. She was first sentenced to two years in prison, but later the sentence was changed to a seven-year prison term. Juldashaeva had previously reported facing threats because of her efforts to assist trafficking victims. The trial against her was characterized by serious irregularities.³

- On 30 June independent journalists Sid Janushev and Pavel Kravets were arrested in Tashkent as they were making pictures of a local bazaar to illustrate an article about the preparations for Uzbekistan's Independence Day, which is celebrated on 1 September. After five hours they were released due to the "lack of a criminal element" in their actions.
- In March-April independent journalists Viktor Krymzalov and Elena Bondar were both fined on questionable administrative charges. He was found guilty of "slander" and "insult" (under articles 40 and 41 of the Administrative Code) because of an online article that he had not even authored. She was fined for "inciting national hatred" (under article 184-3 of the Administrative Code) in relation to her efforts to investigate allegations surrounding a company serving as intermediary between a Russian university and Uzbek students enrolled for distance studies. She had not written a single article on this issue.
- In March, BBC correspondent Nataliya Antelava and Russian photo journalist Viktoria Ivleva were both deported from Tashkent airport immediately upon arrival. They were not given any explanations.

A considerable number of journalists and independent human rights defenders remain imprisoned on politically motivated charges.⁴ There are serious concerns about the health and well-being of these prisoners due to reports of harsh prison conditions, ill-treatment and torture facing them. In January 2012 independent journalist and human rights defender Jamshid Karimov, who is a nephew of the Uzbek president, mysteriously disappeared shortly after he was released from a psychiatric hospital where he had been forcibly detained for five years.

A number of foreign media outlets, as well as foreign journalists accredited in Uzbekistan were forced to leave the country after the 2005 Andijan events, when authorities grew increasingly concerned about criticism of official policies. Among others the office of Radio *Ozodlik* (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), BBC and Voice of America were closed. International organizations promoting human rights were also kicked out. Freedom House's office was liquidated in 2006, while the Uzbek Supreme Court made a final decision to liquidate Human Rights Watch office in Tashkent in 2011.

Foreign journalists and representatives of international human rights organizations are frequently denied visas to visit Uzbekistan or are only granted one-entry tourist visas, which are not renewed.

Recommendations to the authorities of Uzbekistan:

- Put an end to censorship in state media and respect the right of citizens to seek, obtain and disseminate information and ideas of all kinds.
- Stop persecuting independent journalists and human rights defenders and immediately and unconditionally release all journalists and human rights defenders who have been imprisoned on politically motivated grounds.

¹ For more information, see the chapter on Uzbekistan in International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC). Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights and Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU), *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet and other New Media*, November 2011, http://www.iphronline.org/uploads/9/0/2/7/9027585/ca_internet_20111128_e.pdf

² «Подозреваемые в убийстве правозащитника уже на свободе», 13.8.2012, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=&cid=3&nid=20547

³ IPHR and NHC, "Uzbek activist seeking justice for trafficking victims sentenced to prison," 17 July 2012, http://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan_20120717_e.html; statement by IGIHRDU from 11 July 2012, «По сфабрикованному делу на 2 года осуждена правозащитница Гульназа Юлдашева».

⁴ Among these are: Khayrullo Khamidov, Dilmurad Sayid, Salizhon Abdurakhmanov, Gayrat Meliboyev, Bahron Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Ravshanbek Vafojev, Abdulaziz Dadakhonov, Botirbek Eshkuziyev, Yousaf Ruzimuradov, Mahomed Bekzhan, Azam Farmonov, Nosim Isakov, Gaybullo Zhalilov, Rasoul Hudaynazarov, Ganikhon Mamatkhanov, Habibulla Okpulatov, Yuldash Rasulov and Akzam Turgunov.