

Early Warning System Full Implementation Phase

Threats to Civil Society in Uzbekistan

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General Overview

During the reporting period the general human rights situation in Uzbekistan remained critical, with the Uzbek government denying fundamental human rights and freedoms, in particular civil and political rights, to its citizens. Uzbekistan has remained equally unsafe for civil society activists to monitor, document and especially report human rights violations occurring in different sectors of life in the country. There has been no significant change in attitude, national laws and practice towards civil society activists and organisations. No new human rights groups, NGOs, free and independent media or political parties have been officially registered and established in Uzbekistan during the reporting period. The Uzbek government has also failed to release any of the over eighteen political prisoners.

The following areas of concern in Uzbekistan have been identified during the reporting period:

Attacks on Journalists, Media, Freedom of Speech and Expression

During the reporting period the EWS Project has documented several cases of attacks on journalists, media and freedom of speech and expression in Uzbekistan. These cases can be qualified as a new wave of harassment against the few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan.¹

- On 5 January 2010, Abdurasul Djumakulov, editor-in-chief of *Hurriyat* ("Freedom"), the newspaper of the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan and his deputy, Hosil Karimov, were dismissed from their posts for publishing an article illustrating the

¹ After the Andijan massacre in 2005, in February 2006 the government decreed that foreign correspondents could only operate with the authorization of the Foreign Ministry. IWPR, BBC Radio Liberty's Uzbek Service and Radio Ozodlik left the country. In 2008, Associated Press and Reuters ceased their operations. Uzbekistan once had some 80-100 Western and other independent reporters based in Uzbekistan; today, only 38 foreign journalists are accredited with the Uzbek Foreign Ministry. These correspondents are from countries generally loyal or non-confrontational to the Uzbek government: Russia, China, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Iran. A few Western journalists who remain from Agence France Press and Le Soir are very cautious. Any Uzbek journalists who form ties abroad fall under suspicions. In 2009, Sobirjon Yakubov and Bekkul Egamkulov were fired after a trip to Paris; Dmitry Povarov, a respected economics journalist, was dismissed after a stay in France. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists reported that currently seven Uzbek journalists are in prison: Mukhammad Bekzhanov, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, Gairat Mekhliboev, Ortikali Namazov, Djamshid Karimov, Solijon Abdurakhmanov and Dilmurod Sayid. The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders ranks Uzbekistan 160 out of 175 countries surveyed in its Press Freedom Index. Freedom House has ranked Uzbekistan 189 out of 195 countries on its assessment of freedom.

challenges merchants faced trying to gain access to a new market place in Chinoz in Tashkent oblast;²

- On 7-9 January 2010, Sid Yanyshv, Khusniddin Kutbiddinov, Aleksei Volosevich and Marina Kozlova, independent Uzbek journalists were called in and interrogated at the Tashkent prosecutor's office. Each journalist was questioned and shown their detailed, government-compiled personal dossiers, which contained articles, biographical information and documents detailing state surveillance conducted on each of them. The journalists have contributed in the past to international media outlets such as the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the Associated Press and the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, as well as independent regional news websites, such as Ferghana, Uznews, and CentrAsia. The journalists were told that their personal files had been received from the Uzbek Foreign Ministry and National Security Service. The journalists were accused of practicing biased journalism that insulted the Uzbek government. While in custody, they were asked for information about their personal bank accounts, specific articles published by independent media and their relation with the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent and international rights groups such as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch;³
- On 21 January 2010, Hairullo Hamidov, a Muslim sports commentator was arrested for his religious activity. During the pre-trial investigation Hamidov, along with the Assistant Editor of Uzbekistan's sports newspaper, *Champion*, were held at the Tashkent regional police detention centre. Hairullo Hamidov was formally charged under the Criminal Code's Article 216 ("Illegal establishment of Public Associations or Religious Organisations");
- In February the trial investigating Umida Ahmedova, a women human rights defender, photographer and film-maker from Uzbekistan, continued. On 10 February 2010, Umida Ahmedova was found guilty by the Mirabad District Court in Tashkent for "slander" and "insult", under Articles 139 and 140 of the Uzbek Criminal Code, respectively. Ahmedova was found guilty to due to her book of photographs "Women and Men: From Dawn to Dusk", published in 2007 which contained 110 photographs reflecting the life and traditions of Uzbeks, as well as to her documentary film "Women and Men in Customs and Rituals and Virginity Code", depicting daily struggles of people in rural Uzbekistan. After the verdict was announced, the court decided to grant amnesty to Ahmedova, who could have been sentenced from six months' imprisonment up to two years in a labour camp. According to Ahmedova and her relatives, in March 2010 Makhmud Tairov, editor of the Uzbek newspaper *Parkent Tongi*, tried to pressure Akhmedova to withdraw the appeal of her case to prevent further damage to Uzbekistan's image. Tairov hinted that Ahmedova's relatives may also find themselves under indictment, implying that her husband was involved in selling her film. Akhmedova believes Makhmud Tairov, did not act out of his own free will, but was under pressure from Khayriddin Sultanov, the official from the president's office responsible for ideology.

² See for more details at Uzmtronom, January 06, 2010, http://www.uzmetronom.com/2010/01/06/glasnost_do_dobra_ne_dovodit.html

³ See for more details - Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty articles at http://www.rferl.org/content/Uzbek_Prosecutors_Office_Interrogates_Independent_Journalists_/1923684.ht or http://www.rferl.org/content/Media_Watchdog_Alarmed_By_Interrogations_Of_Uzbek_Journalists/1929343.html

Political Prisoners and Deterioration of the Situation of Imprisoned Civil Society Activists

Several cases documented by the EWS Project indicated that the number of political prisoners in Uzbekistan has increased. According to some cases, the situation of political prisoners already in prison deteriorated.

- Uzbek human rights defender Habibbula Akpulatov recently had his prison sentence extended for an additional three years on the charge of systematic violation of his prison's internal rules. Prolongation of prison terms in this way is widely practiced by Uzbek authorities in order to keep the political prisoners in prisons for longer time. Habibbula Akpulatov is a member of the Ishtikhan regional branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan;
- On 13 January 2010, the Ferghana Regional Court on Criminal Cases heard the appeal complaint of imprisoned Uzbek human rights activist Ganikhon Mamatkhanov from the Ferghana region and decided to confirm his five-year imprisonment sentence;
- Human rights defender Gaybullo Jalilov was sentenced to nine years in prison after a closed trial on 18 January 2010. Gaybullo Jalilov is a member of the Karshi branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan;
- On 25 January 2010, Ismoilov Mallaboev, a member of the Fiery Hearts Club, a human rights group based in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan, reported a criminal case opened against him under Article 277 (Hooliganism) of the Criminal Code. Ismoilov Mallaboev is an outspoken human rights activist in the Ferghana region.

Physical Attacks and Harassment Against Civil Society Activists

Uzbek civil society activists, especially human rights defenders and independent journalists, are often physically targeted for their civic position, greatly endangering their personal integrity and security. That implies that from time to time they are attacked and beaten up by unknown persons. Research illustrates that as a general trend in such cases the Uzbek authorities, first, have a tendency to refuse opening an effective and objective investigation and, second, if an investigation is opened, it barely results in anything meaningful. During the reporting period the EWS Project team documented one case in which a human rights activist was physically targeted for his activism.

Dmitry Tikhonov is a member of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan and actively monitors the human rights situation in the town of Angren in the Tashkent region. On 23 February at approximately 8 pm, Dmitry Tikhonov was attacked by two unidentified men in the garage of his home in Angren. During the attack, the men reportedly asked him "Why do you write on the internet?" The Human Rights Alliance recently reported that Tikhonov is unable to receive proper medical treatment in Angren because he is constantly receiving anonymous messages with threats on his life. The police opened an investigation into this case, but as of date, no results have been made public.

Persecution Against Independent Religious Groups

The Uzbek government has increasingly controlled the practice of freedom of religion and belief of its citizens by sanctioning religious practice only within the government set boundaries and outlawing all other forms of practice falling outside these boundaries. The

Uzbek government has increasingly attempted to move such political notions as “extremism”, “radicalism” and “terrorism” into the legal context.

- On 4 February 2010, a British national of Irish origin was deported from Uzbekistan for illegally preaching the Bahai religion. Tohiriy Sepeher had worked in Uzbekistan as an English teacher since 1990, but had also "carried out missionary work" together with a citizen of Kazakhstan. According to official statements, the two opened ten Bahai branches in six regions of Uzbekistan;
- In February 2010 Almalyk City Criminal Court, near Tashkent, fined a group of 15 Baptists under Article 240 Part 2 ("Proselytism") of the Administrative Code. Each Baptist was fined 3,768,000 soms (1,810 Euros, or 2,490 U.S. Dollars). The Baptists were convicted of conducting "illegal teaching of religious doctrines without special authorization from a central religious organisation". A group of 13 members of an unregistered Baptist church from Almalyk tried unsuccessfully to bring a complaint against the illegal actions of the Uzbek police and bring the perpetrators to the court.

Increased Restrictions on Independent Professional Groups

During the reporting period the Uzbek authorities introduced new restrictions on medical professionals in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek Health Ministry has imposed strict controls on foreign travel by the country's leading medical workers. On February 15, the Health Ministry issued order No. 178 which regulates foreign travel and participation in international conferences and educational activities by Uzbek health officials, doctors, medical officers and the heads of medical institutions. The new order aims to ensure that leading Uzbek medical officials do not give "false" information about health issues in Uzbekistan and to limit cooperation with international organisations.

According to the order, Uzbek medical workers planning to go abroad -- both on business trips and private vacations -- are required to submit a written statement of purpose and must have any public speeches they might give pre-approved by the Health Ministry. All medical workers must also obtain ministry approval before applying for an exit visa to travel abroad, otherwise they will be prohibited from future foreign trips.⁴ The order also requires medical workers to send a written report about their trip within three days upon returning to Uzbekistan to the Health Ministry's Foreign and Economic Affairs Department.

Encroachment on the Internet

Media in Uzbekistan is tightly controlled by the government. Journalists operate within the confines of laws prohibiting anti-government propaganda and insulting officials which carry lengthy penalties, including imprisonment. Amongst the tightly controlled media includes internet communications. During the reporting period, there was no change or improvement in the situation with media censorship in general, and Internet censorship in particular.

The Yunusabad District Criminal Court in Tashkent ordered the medical website *eddoctor.uz* to be shut down 23 March for "spreading material of a pornographic nature" and imposed a stiff fine on its editor. A criminal case was opened against editor Oybek Hoyjaev and the Uzbek Telecommunication and Information Technology Agency concluded that the website

⁴ The Uzbek authorities have retained a system of issuing exit visas to those Uzbekistani citizens who want or plan to travel abroad. The procedure of applying to and receiving the exit visa (issued for two years, can be reissued again for two years for unrestricted times under new applications) is known as time-consuming, excessively bureaucratic and corrupt – Sukhrobjon Ismoilov.

was detrimental to youth for using such "pornographic" words as "sex," "male organ" and "vagina." Hoyjaev denied the charges and demanded a review by an independent commission, the Health Ministry or the Tashkent Medical Academy. His requests were ignored and a criminal court convened on 12 March and issued a sentence on 23 March to fine Hoyjaev 753,000 soms (about 325 U.S. Dollars) and suspend the website for a month. Hoyjaev said he would appeal the sentence, and noted that the closure of his award-winning site was part of a larger trend of the suppression of grassroots initiatives in Uzbekistan.

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Tashkent, Uzbekistan