



UZBEKISTAN

Government crackdown on human rights defenders

Secret trials and torture in the 'information war'

The ruthless campaign by the government of Uzbekistan to silence human rights activists and journalists shows no sign of abating. The imprisonment, ill-treatment and harassment of individual human rights defenders has accelerated as protests over the killings of hundreds of unarmed men, women and children in Andizhan on 13 May 2005 refuse to go away.

President Islam Karimov conceded publicly in October 2006 that failures by local authorities might have contributed to unrest in the eastern town of Andizhan. Yet his government is still rejecting any independent international investigation of reports that the security forces fired indiscriminately at largely peaceful demonstrators. Instead, hundreds of protesters were detained and scores of people have reportedly been sentenced to up to 22 years in prison, including several prominent human rights defenders. Most of the trials were closed or secret.

International organizations have been forced to close their operations in Uzbekistan, including the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, in March 2006. The government has continued to renege on its promise to allow access to prisons by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Some of the harshest punishments have been inflicted on Uzbekistan's own human rights defenders. Amnesty International is calling on the government of Uzbekistan to stop the persecution of human rights activists and journalists, and for effective action by the international community in support of those who courageously stand up for human rights.

Prisoners of conscience

Some human rights defenders have been prosecuted on charges that were reportedly fabricated, and sentenced to long prison terms after grossly unfair trials that denied basic rights of defence and failed to meet international legal standards.

Saidzhakhon Zainabitdinov



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Chair of the Appellatsia (Appeal) human rights group in Andizhan, Saidzhakhon Zainabitdinov was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in January 2006. Arrested on 21 May 2005, his trial in the capital, Tashkent, was closed even to a defence lawyer appointed by his family. He was convicted of

slander, "spreading information with the aim of causing panic" and other charges in connection with the killings in Andizhan. The court's verdict and sentence were not officially disclosed until February 2006. He has been held incommunicado for lengthy periods and his current whereabouts remain unclear.

Dilmurod Muhiddinov

The trial of Dilmurod Muhiddinov, from the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights group in Andizhan, was also closed. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in January 2006 after conviction on charges of attempting to overthrow the state, distributing materials that threatened public order, and involvement in "religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organizations". Arrested with four other Ezgulik activists in May and June 2005, one of whom was subsequently released without charge and three others were convicted with him, receiving suspended three-year prison terms. They were arrested for being in possession of a statement on the Andizhan events issued by the opposition Birlik (Unity) party. The police also seized human rights materials from their homes.



Mutabar Tadzhibaeva

Mutabar Tadzhibaeva, head of the Utiuraklar (Fiery Hearts) human rights organization in the eastern town of Ferghana, was sentenced to eight years in prison in March 2006. She was convicted on 13 charges including membership of an illegal organization and using funds from foreign governments to threaten public order. She had insufficient time to prepare her defence, and consultations with her lawyer were in the presence of armed guards. In court, she was seated inside a cage, and access to the courtroom was severely restricted, including for her family. Her lawyer was forbidden to cross-examine prosecution witnesses. Mutabar Tadzhibaeva lost an appeal in May 2006.



Mutabar Tadzhibaeva

Since her conviction, visits by her family and lawyers have been obstructed and parcels have not reached her. She was put in a punishment cell and given insufficient food and drink for 10 days for infringing prison rules after a pair of scissors was allegedly planted under her mattress. Her health is said to be

deteriorating. One lawyer felt unable to go on representing her after she received threats, including against her own family.

Umida Niazova

Umida Niazova, a journalist and member of the Veritas human rights group, was detained on 22 January 2007 near the south-eastern border with Kyrgyzstan. On 28 January she was charged in Tashkent with illegally crossing the border and with smuggling subversive and “extremist” literature into the country, both offences punishable by up to 10 years’ imprisonment. On the day of her arrest she had been expecting to receive back from her lawyer her laptop computer and passport, confiscated by police at Tashkent airport in December 2006 as she returned from a human rights seminar in Kyrgyzstan. At that time, her computer had contained a report on the Andizhan killings by the international NGO, Human Rights Watch, for whom she was working as a translator in Tashkent.



Umida Niazova



Tortured with impunity

Members of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), an organization long denied official registration, have been among those unfairly tried and imprisoned, most recently for defending farmers' economic rights and challenging official corruption.

Criminal libel case

Three leading HRSU members in Samarkand region were convicted on fabricated charges of extortion and criminal libel in October 2005. Norboi Kholzhigitov, a farmer and member of the banned Ozod Dehkonlar (Free Peasants) party, was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, and teachers Abdusattor Irzaev and Khabibula Akpulatov to six years. They were alleged to have accused the head of a collective farm of unlawful activities and to have obtained the signatures of 60 farm workers in support of the complaint. The court dismissed further charges of threatening the President's life, trying to overthrow the state and forming illegal organizations.

All three were reportedly tortured following their detention on 4 June 2005. Relatives and supporters have been harassed, including many of the hundreds of farmers who gathered on 8 June 2005 to protest that the charges against the three were fictitious. Since working on their case, their lawyer, who has a physical disability, has reportedly been assaulted twice by law enforcement officers, including once at his home on 18 July 2005. The use of criminal libel charges by the state – instead of civil libel proceedings brought by an individual – implied an injury to society at large that could not be justified in the case.

Azam Farmonov and Alisher Karamatov



Azam Farmonov

Azam Farmonov and Alisher Karamatov, leading HRSU members in the town of Gulistan (Gulistan), were convicted of extortion and sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in June 2006. Following their detention in April 2006 they were taken to a pre-trial detention centre in the town of Khavast and reportedly beaten with truncheons

on their legs and heels, near-suffocated with gas masks and forced to sign "confession" statements. At their trial, they were effectively denied the assistance of a defence lawyer. Although Tolib Yakubov, head of the HRSU, had registered as their legal representative, he was not given prior notice of the start of their trial and was later refused adequate time to prepare a defence.

Azam Farmonov and Alisher Karamatov had been investigating farmers' complaints of official malpractice, extortion and corruption. Local officials were said to have subsequently pressured farmers into accusing the two activists of inciting farmers to implicate officials.

Ulugbek Khaidarov

Journalist Ulugbek Khaidarov was reported to have been severely tortured, both before and after he was sentenced in October 2006 to six years' imprisonment for extortion. He had been arrested in September 2006 at a bus stop in Dzhizzakh shortly after he had felt a woman who brushed past him put something in his pocket. It



Ulugbek Khaidarov in prison

turned out to be US\$400, which he immediately threw to the ground, fearful that he was being set up.

After his wife visited him in detention a few days later, she reported that he looked ill and emaciated, and could hardly speak because his face was paralyzed on one side. His refusal of an independent defence lawyer at his trial and his request for relatives and human rights observers to leave the court strongly suggested he was acting under duress.

Following his conviction, he was sent to a prison in Navoi, where he and 14 other prisoners were reportedly forced to do strenuous and painful exercises, were kicked and beaten with clubs, including on their bare feet, and were all denied medical treatment. He was released in November after his conviction was quashed on appeal. Medical examination later revealed that he had a fractured heel bone.

Detention and assault

Some human rights defenders have been confined in psychiatric hospitals as a form of detention and punishment, or physically assaulted, detained or otherwise harassed and threatened.

Confined in psychiatric hospital



Dzhamsheed Karimov

Dzhamsheed Karimov, a journalist and relative of President Karimov, has reportedly been detained in a psychiatric hospital since September 2006 after going missing in Dzhizzakh. The local authorities denied any knowledge of his whereabouts, while at the same time stating that he had undergone psychiatric treatment in the past. His family were threatened by the local authorities

and had their telephone cut off after they alerted international organizations to their fears that his disappearance was linked to his work as a journalist. He is reportedly still in a locked ward of the psychiatric hospital in Samarkand. He had apparently been considering leaving the country following harassment for his work for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting and other international websites.

Harassment



Aleksei Volosevich

In November 2006 journalist Aleksei Volosevich was attacked by five unidentified men who knocked him to the ground near his home in Tashkent, poured buckets of green paint all over him and painted threats on the door to his apartment building. He has faced harassment since he reported on the Andizhan killings on the main independent Russian-language website, www.Ferghana.ru. He was

subsequently accused of treason in Pravda Vostoka (Truth of the East), a newspaper owned by the government. He also reported on the trial of 15 men charged with organizing the Andizhan protests and other trials of opposition leaders.

Elena Urlaeva

Only five out of 11 human rights defenders, invited to meet the new German Ambassador in Tashkent in September 2006, managed to get to the meeting. The rest were threatened, placed under house-arrest or, as in the case of Elena Urlaeva,

forced into a police car, driven around for four hours, threatened and questioned.

Elena Urlaeva has been detained and assaulted numerous times since 2002. In one instance, from August to September 2002, she was forcibly confined to a psychiatric hospital for



Elena Urlaeva

holding a human rights protest outside the Ministry of Justice building in Tashkent. On 28 June 2005 she was reportedly punched, kicked and verbally abused by three Internal Affairs officers while protesting against a colleague's detention outside the Ministry of Internal Affairs, before being questioned by police about her involvement in demonstrations. On 27 August 2005 she was detained as she

distributed leaflets in Tashkent, charged with "desecrating state symbols" and detained at the Psychiatric Hospital in Tashkent. Although the hospital's evaluation, given on 20 September, was that she was "healthy, sane, and adequate", on 23 September she was transferred to the Republican Psychiatric Hospital, which declared her mentally ill and in need of medical treatment. She was released at the end of October 2005.

Recommendations

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities in Uzbekistan to:

- ▶ release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience, including Saidzhakhon Zainabidinov; Dilmurod Muhiddinov; Mutabar Tadzhibaeva; Umida Niazova, Azam Farmanov and Alisher Karamatov; Norboi Kholzhigitov, Abdusattor Irzaev and Khabibula Akpulatov;
- ▶ investigate promptly and impartially allegations of torture or other ill-treatment, bring to justice those responsible, and ensure redress for Azam Farmanov and Alisher Karamatov; Norboi Kholzhigitov, Abdusattor Irzaev and Khabibula Akpulatov; and Ulugbek Khaidarov;
- ▶ publicly disclose the whereabouts of Dzhamsheed Karimov, and ensure that independent human rights monitors have access to him;
- ▶ investigate assaults on and harassment of human rights defenders, bring to justice those responsible for human rights violations against them, and ensure redress for Elena Urlaeva and Aleksei Volosevich;

- ▶ grant the ICRC immediate access to those detained and imprisoned;
- ▶ ensure that everyone, including human rights defenders, can peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression in conformity with Uzbekistan's legally binding commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to:

- ▶ acknowledge the important role and valuable work of individuals, groups and associations in contributing to monitoring, reporting, preventing and ending violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and take measures to support the legitimate work of human rights defenders and activists;
- ▶ when appropriate, take immediate measures to protect individual human rights defenders at risk of human rights violations.

More information on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan
can be obtained at www.amnesty.org