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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: **UZBEKISTAN** (This item will be sent to Russian media by the research team)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

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Iraq - 29 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 212/94

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

Nigeria - 11 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 248/94

News Service 251/94

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UZBEKISTAN: AI WELCOMES ANNOUNCEMENT OF AMNESTY FOR FIVE PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Amnesty International welcomes yesterday's announcement that President Islam Karimov has decreed the release of five prisoners of conscience.

"While we welcome this news, we are still concerned about repression of the political opposition in Uzbekistan, including the continuing detention of other probable prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said.

According to the decree, the decision to release the five men was influenced by appeals for clemency made both by the prisoners and on their behalf. However, the decree also referred to the prisoners' "acknowledgement of their guilt and their repentance" and their "desire in future to serve society through honest labour".

Atanazar Aripov and Salavat Umurzakov, activists in the outlawed Erk party, were jailed in March for five and three years respectively following conviction for "conspiracy with the aim of seizing power". They were both prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International considered the other three men to be probable prisoners of conscience convicted of fabricated criminal offences. Pulat Akhunov, deputy chairman of the outlawed Birlik movement, was arrested in July 1992 on a hooliganism charge, and in the course of his original 18-month prison sentence he was convicted of new charges of drugs possession and assault and sentenced to a further three years' imprisonment. Inamzhon Tursunov, a regional Erk leader, was similarly imprisoned for two years in February 1993 for hooliganism. Nosyr Zokhir, a regional leader of Birlik, was arrested in November 1993 and sentenced the following August to two and half years' imprisonment for illegal possession of drugs and a weapon.

Another probable prisoner of conscience who is still imprisoned is Akhmatkhan Turakhanov of Birlik, whose arrest in November 1993 was closely linked to that of Nosyr Zokhir. He was given an 18-month prison sentence in September following conviction on a possibly fabricated firearms possession charge.

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