

By: Maran Turner
EurasiaNet Commentary
December 1, 2010

Kazakhstan: Central Asian States Should Fulfill OSCE-Mandated Rights Commitments

The OSCE summit, which opened December 1 in Kazakhstan, is offering member states an important opportunity to address regional security concerns. It also is providing a chance for participants to address shortcomings in the sphere of human rights. The host of the summit, Kazakhstan, along with its neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, should be among those states confronted on their rights records.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is the world's largest security organization. US and European interests in Central Asia have grown, with the aims of stabilizing the region and expanding Western corporate access to the region's abundant natural resources. With these interests should come increasing pressure on all OSCE members to uphold human rights obligations. Despite the OSCE's mission, the rights records of some members constitute a blemish on the organization's image, and an impediment to regional security.

While Kyrgyzstan dominated the news during the summer, when violence consumed the southern regions of the country, the international community has paid little attention to its neighbors. Meanwhile, many people in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan continue to suffer. There has been some social progress – in most cases the bare minimum required to entice investment – but all three governments deny their citizens fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. And all three have demonstrated heavy-handedness, resorting to imprisoning their domestic critics.

Kazakhstan's government, for example, has imprisoned Ramazan Yesergepov, the editor of the now closed Alma-Ata Info newspaper. Authorities arrested the editor after he published an article entitled "Who Rules the Country: the President or the Kazakh National Security Committee?" The article included information received from an anonymous source about attempts by an official to influence a local prosecutor and judge. Yesergepov is serving a three-year prison term.

Uzbekistan, meanwhile, is detaining Akzam Turgunov, a longtime human rights advocate. In 2007, he was sentenced to 10 years for "embezzlement," a charge described by rights activists as politically motivated. Police tortured him during interrogation by pouring boiling water on him and today he is detained in a prison work camp where he is forced to work in a brick factory for 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Turkmenistan continues to detain Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khadzhiiev, two human rights activists who worked to expose poor human rights, education, and health care conditions in Turkmenistan. For that, they were accused publicly of “conspiring with foreigners to destabilize the state.” This was after being arrested in June 2006, held incommunicado for two months, and tortured. Following a hasty trial, Amanklychev and Khadzhiiev were convicted on a weapons possession charge and sentenced to seven years in prison. Rights activists contend their arrest was politically motivated. They are believed to be serving their sentences in a remote prison near the Caspian Sea.

In obtaining OSCE membership, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan each obligated themselves to respect the human rights of its citizens, promote democracy, and uphold the rule of law. But these nations not only linger below international standards, they seem quite comfortable to remain there. The cases of these individual prisoners of conscience demonstrate the failure of these countries to live up to their obligations and they are all emblematic of the very human rights abuses the OSCE mission seeks to end.

The US government and other nations have raised these cases and those of other wrongfully imprisoned persons. It is time to raise them again in Astana, during the OSCE summit. The OSCE gathering is the perfect occasion to hold these nations accountable for their failure to respect the rights of citizens. For stability and legitimate democracy to take root in Central Asia, respect for individual freedom is an absolute necessity, and it must begin with the release of prisoners of conscience.

Maran Turner is the executive director of Freedom Now, a Washington, DC,-based organization that seeks to free prisoners of conscience, and which works on behalf of Messrs Yesergepov, Turgunov, Amanklychev, and Khadzhiiev.