

For Immediate Release

Uzbekistan: Free Political Prisoners on Constitution Day

Use Anniversary to Advance Real Reform

(Paris, December 6, 2012) – The Uzbek government should unconditionally release all of its political prisoners on the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the country’s constitution on December 8, 2012, human rights groups said today. Freeing the country’s many political prisoners would demonstrate a genuine commitment to [Uzbekistan](#)’s much-touted reform process, the groups said.

The nine groups are Human Rights Watch, Freedom Now, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, the International Partnership for Human Rights, the International Association for Human Rights Defense “Fiery Hearts Club,” PEN American Center, ACAT-France, and the International Federation for Human Rights.

“Journalists, rights defenders, writers, and opposition and religious figures held solely on account of their peaceful activities shouldn’t be in prison in the first place,” said [Steve Swerdlow](#), Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Freeing political prisoners for Constitution Day is an opportunity for President Islam Karimov to show Uzbekistan’s people and international partners that he’s willing to take a genuine step toward reform.”

Uzbek authorities regularly announce an amnesty, potentially for thousands of prisoners, for Constitution Day. But those imprisoned on politically motivated charges are almost never released under these amnesties. Even if they are released, the amnesty’s terms leave the original unlawful convictions intact. The rights groups also called on Uzbekistan’s authorities to allow all prisoners access to necessary medical care and family visits to which they are entitled under international human rights law.

Human rights defenders in prison for no reason other than their legitimate human rights work include: Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Azam Formonov, Mehrinisso Hamdamova, Zulhumor Hamdamova, Isroiljon Holdarov, Nosim Isakov, Gaibullo Jalilov, Abdurasul Khudoinazarov, Erkin Kuziev, Ganihon Mamatkhanov, Zafarjon Rahimov, Yuldash Rasulov, Dilmurod Saidov, [Akzam Turgunov](#), and Gulnaza Yuldasheva. The journalist Jamshid Karimov was reported to have been released in 2011 from a psychiatric ward where he was forcibly confined but has disappeared, prompting fears that he was detained again and is being held incommunicado.

Several are in serious ill-health and at least seven have suffered torture or ill-treatment in prison. United Nations (UN) bodies and a recent [report](#) by Human Rights Watch have found that torture

and ill-treatment are systematic and widespread in places of detention. In one case, during an interrogation following the arrest of the activist Turgunov in 2008 on trumped-up charges, a police officer poured boiling water on Turgunov's back when he refused to sign a false confession. He lost consciousness and suffered severe burns. Though Turgunov later revealed his burn marks in open court, the judge accepted as fact statements made by police that they had not tortured him.

Other prominent writers, intellectuals, and opposition figures in jail on politically motivated charges include: Isak Abdullaev, Azamat Azimov, Muhammad Bekjanov, Batyrbek Eshkuziev, Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, Khayrullo Hamidov, Bahrom Ibragimov, [Murod Juraev](#), Davron Kabilov, Mamadali Karabaev, Matluba Karimova, Samandar Kukanov, Jamol Kutliev, Mamadali Mahmudov, Gayrat Mehliboev, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, Rustam Usmanov, Ravshanbek Vafoev, and Akram Yuldashev.

In addition, the Uzbek government has imprisoned thousands of independent Muslims and other religious believers who practice their faith outside state controls or who belong to unregistered religious organizations on overly broad and vague charges of so-called "religious extremism," "attempts to overthrow the constitutional order," and possession of "illegal religious literature."

The [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) recently found that the Uzbek government's practice of punishing its citizens for exercising fundamental rights of free expression is a violation of its international obligations.

"International law and Uzbekistan's own constitution demand respect for human rights, such as free expression, association, assembly, and belief," said Patrick Griffith, an attorney with Freedom Now. "For the constitution to have any meaning the government must immediately release all those who have been imprisoned for exercising these fundamental rights."

Each year, in connection with Uzbekistan's national independence and Constitution Day celebrations, several thousand prisoners are released under amnesties. The amnesties are usually reserved for those convicted of less serious offenses and for specific demographic categories such as teenagers, women, and prisoners over age 60. Prison directors have wide discretion over who to release. Political prisoners are denied amnesty year after year for alleged infractions of internal prison regulations. Infractions used as a basis for [denying amnesty](#) have included saying prayers and wearing a white shirt.

Authorities also extend the prison sentences of imprisoned rights activists, journalists, political opposition figures, and thousands of individuals serving sentences for "religious extremism" for alleged violations of prison regulations. Such extensions occur without due process and can add years to a prisoner's sentence.

“The illegal extension of sentences for political prisoners, some of whom have been behind bars for well over a decade, shows the particular cruelty of Uzbekistan’s criminal justice system,” said Nadejda Atayeva, president of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia. “Several of these men, such as Makhmadali Makhmudov, Murod Juraev, and Solijon Abdurakhmanov, are elderly and in ill-health. Continuously extending their sentences effectively condemns them to die behind bars.”

At the end of January, just days before his 13-year prison sentence was set to expire, authorities gave Bekjanov, former editor of the political opposition newspaper *Erk*, an additional five-year sentence for alleged violations of internal prison rules. Bekjanov has been jailed since 1999. He and Ruzimuradov have been imprisoned longer than any other reporter worldwide, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).

While Uzbek authorities have [released](#) a few human rights defenders over the last several years, the pace of releases has slowed since the EU and the US moved to normalize ties with Uzbekistan, lifting sanctions in 2009 and 2012 respectively, seeking to secure the Uzbek government’s cooperation on the war in Afghanistan.

In addition to a campaign of harassment and intimidation of civil society activists, Uzbek authorities also imprisoned at least two more rights activists this year: Kuziev, a member of the human rights organization *Ezgulik* (“Compassion”) and Yuldasheva, a member of the Initiative Group of Human Rights Defenders. Yuldasheva, just 26 years old, was sentenced in July to seven years on trumped-up fraud charges for investigating alleged police involvement in human trafficking.

“The ongoing harassment of civil society and recent sentencing of more rights activists to prison show that Tashkent is clearly not feeling enough pressure from the US, EU, or other key players to change its behavior,” said Artak Kirakosyan, general secretary of the [International Federation for Human Rights](#). “Uzbekistan’s civil society and its people are in dire need of a stronger voice from Washington, Brussels, Berlin, Paris and other capitals in defense of their human rights.”

While the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has access to Uzbekistan’s prisons and detention centers, its work is confidential and the Uzbek government prevents public scrutiny of its prisons by local civil society and journalists, international nongovernmental organizations, and reporters. For the past decade, it has [denied access](#) to all 11 UN special monitors who have requested invitations – including the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders – and has failed to comply with recommendations by various expert bodies. The government has forced many international organizations and media outlets to leave Uzbekistan, and in March 2011, Uzbek authorities forced Human Rights Watch to [close](#) its

Tashkent office. The government denies registration to local independent human rights groups.

In November, Uzbek prison officials tried to prevent an ICRC delegation from visiting with Abdurakhmanov, the imprisoned journalist whom authorities had hidden from ICRC for months, the independent *Uznews.net* news site reported. On one previous ICRC visit to prison camp No. 64/61, Abdurakhmanov was driven out of the prison and hidden from inspectors. On this occasion, Abdurakhmanov's son told the news site that prison officials brought an impostor to meet with the ICRC delegation, who quickly established that he was not Abdurakhmanov.

Both Uzbek law and international law require prison authorities to provide basic necessities to all prisoners, to allow them regular visits – including personal visits by family members – and to treat them with dignity and respect. The Convention against Torture and Other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane, and Degrading Treatment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibit inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Uzbekistan is a party to both treaties. Uzbek authorities should order an immediate investigation of all allegations of mistreatment of prisoners held on politically motivated charges, and also allow for re-examination of the closed hearings in which political prisoners' sentences have been extended, the rights groups said.

“Rather than placing activists under house arrest and suppressing peaceful attempts to protest, President Karimov should commemorate Constitution Day by honoring the constitution's principles and fulfilling Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments,” said Mutabar Tadjibaeva, former political prisoner and president of the “Fiery Hearts Club.” “Uzbekistan's rights defenders, journalists, opposition and religious figures have suffered long enough.”

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