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6/03/2010: Uzbekistan: USCIRF Denounces Stepped-Up Government Crackdown on Religion



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WASHINGTON, DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported today that Uzbekistan has intensified its campaign of state-control and repression of the country's religious communities.

This occurred in spite of the move by the United States to enhance its diplomatic and military engagement with the Uzbekistan government and other countries in Central Asia.

"As this government crackdown on Christians, Muslims and others has intensified, it appears that no one is safe -- all religious denominations are being targeted" said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "I fear that Uzbekistan's abysmal human rights record is sinking to a new low, and that US efforts at seeking to improve bilateral engagement and cooperation have done nothing to improve the government's respect for international human rights standards."

Recent instances include:

--In April 2010, the Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court issued lengthy prison sentences to Mehriniso Hamdamova, her sister Zulkhumor and their relative Shahlo Rakhmonova. Hamdamova received a seven-year labor camp term. The other two women each got a six and half year labor camp sentence for private teaching about Islam.

--In May 2010, police raided the registered Church of Christ in Tashkent, and three congregants were sentenced in closed trials to 15-day jail terms.

--Also in May, a court issued a massive fine against a Baptist in the Namangan region and ordered the destruction of his New Testament.

--In late May, Hairulla Hamidov, a popular young TV journalist, and six other Muslims received six-year prison terms in a flawed trial for allegedly organizing a banned extremist Muslim group.

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, basic human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, have been under assault. The State Department named Uzbekistan a "Country of Particular Concern" in 2006 due to its systemic repression of freedom of religion or belief. When no further U.S. action followed, the Uzbek government continued its brutal policies mainly directed against its Muslim majority. These Uzbek government abuses are of such a scale and severity that they constitute a threat to the country's long-term stability.

"As recent events in Kyrgyzstan have shown, instability in Central Asia can have an impact on our national security. Religious freedom limitations, particularly against the majority Muslim population, can also lead to instability, and the United States needs to respond more effectively both in public and private to these human rights abuses in Uzbekistan," said Leo.

Leo continued, "One way to send a clear signal to the Uzbek government is to use the CPC designation to levy a sanction for these gross abuses, or to leverage a binding agreement for improvements. This record of continued repression shows that the United States must redouble its engagement with the Uzbek government on human rights issues."

Though security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members of groups that claim a religious linkage, these threats neither excuse nor justify the scope and severity of the Uzbek government's maltreatment of religious believers. Members of other non-violent unregistered Muslim groups have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms in trials that fall far short of international standards. In 2009, Uzbek courts sentenced 47 individuals to prison terms totaling 380 years for reading the books of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Although charged with extremism, neither Nursi nor those charged in Uzbekistan have a history of using or advocating violence. They join thousands of others in Uzbekistan imprisoned, and often tortured, for religious activities allowed under international law.

Additionally, Uzbek police and security forces continue to raid and repress members of registered and unregistered religious groups. Religious minority groups, especially those viewed as engaging in proselytism, also are targeted. Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov from the city of Andijon, continues to serve a four year term imposed in 2007. Three Jehovah's Witnesses are serving sentences of between three and a half and four years for "illegal" religious activity.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at 202-538-2044
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