



World Report 2016 - Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan maintained its appalling human rights record in 2015. A decade after government forces massacred hundreds of largely peaceful protesters in the city of Andijan, the Uzbek government continues to deny justice to the victims. In March, authoritarian President Islam Karimov's 26-year rule was extended by another five years in elections international observers found lacked any meaningful choice and violated Uzbekistan's constitution. The government denies citizens the freedoms of association, expression, and religion, using the country's pervasive security services to maintain rigid control over the population.

Thousands of people are imprisoned on politically motivated charges, torture is endemic, and authorities regularly harass human rights activists, opposition members, and journalists. Muslims and Christians who practice their religion outside strict state controls are persecuted. Authorities force millions of adults to harvest cotton every fall under harsh conditions, netting enormous profits for the government.

Despite continuing abuses, the United States and European Union failed to condition ties with Uzbekistan on improvements in human rights.

Freedom of Expression, Pluralism

In authoritarian Uzbekistan, citizens are not able to freely express their opinions on elections, form political parties, field any independent candidates, or otherwise ensure a transparent, democratic electoral process.

In the March presidential election, President Karimov stood for a fourth five-year term, despite the constitution's prohibition on serving more than two consecutive terms. In its final report, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe noted the election's absence of meaningful "political debate and genuine competition," stating that the fundamental freedoms of association, assembly, and expression were effectively curtailed.

Imprisonment and Harassment of Critics

The government has imprisoned thousands of people on politically motivated charges, mostly religious believers, but also human rights and opposition activists, journalists, and other perceived critics. Authorities frequently subject detainees to torture and arbitrarily extend their sentences. Many prisoners suffer from poor health.

Human rights activists in prison include Azam Farmonov, Mehriniso Hamdamova, Zulhumor Hamdamova, Isroiljon Kholdorov, Gaybullo Jalilov, Nuriddin Jumaniyazov, Matluba Kamilova, Ganikhon Mamatkhanov, Chuyan Mamatkulov, Zafarjon Rahimov, Yuldash Rasulov, Bobomurod Razzokov, Fahriddin Tillaev, and Akzam Turgunov. Journalists in prison include Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Muhammad Bekjanov, Gayrat Mikhliboev, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, and Dilmurod Saidov.

Opposition activists behind bars include Samandar Kukanov, Kudratbek Rasulov, and Rustam Usmanov. Imprisoned religious figures and other perceived government critics include Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, Akram Yuldashev, Nodirbek Yusupov, Dilorom Abdukodirova, Botirbek Eshkuziev, Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Erkin Musaev, Davron Tojiev, and Ravshanbek Vafoev.

Imprisoned rights defender Azam Farmonov's nine-year prison term was due to end in April. Weeks before Farmonov's release, officials accused him of unspecified "violations of prison rules" – a practice authorities have used to arbitrarily extend political prisoners' sentences – and kept him in prison. In May, authorities extended his sentence by five years.

In May, police officers in the town of Chinaz detained Elena Urlaeva, head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, a local human rights group, as she was interviewing doctors and teachers forced to pick cotton. The police and medical staff forcibly sedated Urlaeva, and then subjected her to a body cavity search, X-rays, and other cruel and degrading treatment during an 11-hour interrogation, saying they were looking for a memory card from her camera.

Uzbekistan still requires exit visas for citizens to travel abroad, and authorities often withhold the visas as a tool to punish dissidents. Authorities prohibited artist Vyacheslav Okhunov from traveling abroad in 2015 after he equated Gulnara Karimova, President Karimov's daughter, with a monkey in his works of art. Many others have been banned from traveling abroad in recent years, including activists Shukhrat Rustamov, Sergei Naumov, Saida Kurbanova, Elena Urlaeva, and Uktam Pardaev.

In August, a Tashkent court upheld a lower court's finding that rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov, a longtime member of the Human Rights Alliance, was insane and should be involuntarily committed for forced psychiatric treatment. Rustamov is currently appealing the ruling. In recent years, authorities have subjected rights activists Elena Urlaeva, Jamshid Karimov, Alikul Sarymsakov, and others to forced psychiatric treatment as a form of punishment for their peaceful work.

In November, authorities allowed Murod Juraev, one of the world's longest-imprisoned political activists, to leave prison after 21 years. A former member of parliament accused of seeking to "overthrow the constitutional order," Juraev was repeatedly tortured and had his original nine-year sentence arbitrarily extended by twelve years on absurd charges, including "improperly peeling carrots" in the prison kitchen.

In December 2014, Uznews.net, a Germany-based independent news website focused on Uzbekistan, closed down. A month earlier, the names of a dozen of the site's Uzbekistan-based contributors were publicized when editor Galima Bukharbaeva's email account was hacked. She accused Uzbek security agents of responsibility.

Torture

Torture is widespread and unpunished in Uzbekistan. Detainees' rights are violated at every stage of criminal investigations and trials, despite habeas corpus amendments that went into effect in 2008. The government has failed to meaningfully implement recommendations to combat torture made by the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, the Committee against Torture, and other international bodies. The state-controlled bar association has disbarred lawyers that take on politically sensitive cases.

Following the forced return of six Uzbek asylum seekers from Norway to Uzbekistan in December 2014, authorities arrested, tortured, and tried the asylum seekers on charges of terrorism, accusing them of viewing "extremist" videos in Norway. In February 2015, state-sponsored television aired a film containing excerpts of the defendants confessing, in which the men displayed visible signs they had been tortured.

Andijan Massacre

May 13 marked 10 years since government forces killed hundreds of largely peaceful protesters in the city of Andijan. Defying numerous calls to allow an independent investigation into the massacre, Uzbek officials continued to state that the matter is "closed." On the massacre's 10th anniversary, both the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour renewed calls for an independent investigation.

In 2015, Human Rights Watch interviewed dozens of Uzbeks, many outside the country, who expressed fear about speaking on the record about Andijan, citing threats to themselves and family members who remain in Uzbekistan. They stated that authorities still regularly call their relatives in for questioning, and force them to sign statements saying that those who fled abroad after the massacre are terrorists. The wife of one Andijan refugee said that since the massacre, officials have interrogated her monthly, including about her husband's whereabouts, and threatened to force her into prostitution in retaliation for his participation in the protest.

Forced Labor

State-organized forced labor of adults in the cotton industry remains widespread. In 2015, authorities compelled farmers to meet an annual production quota and forced millions of adults to harvest cotton in the fall.

Teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, and private sector employees were forced to pick cotton under threat of dismissal from work or loss of salary and pension and welfare benefits, and authorities detained and threatened citizens attempting to report these abuses.

In September, police detained and ordered body cavity searches of activists Elena Urlaeva and Malohat Eshonqulova over the course of a 14-hour detention. On October 20, authorities filed

administrative charges against activist Dmitry Tikhonov in connection with his human rights work. The same day, in circumstances that appear orchestrated by authorities, Tikhonov's home was burned down, destroying his archive of evidence of forced labor. Unknown assailants stole additional materials from a room in his home untouched by the fire.

At least six people died as a result of the unsafe working conditions during the 2015 cotton harvest, according to independent monitors.

Following a decade of global pressure, authorities did not mobilize children to harvest cotton in 2015, as in 2014, and instead increased the number of forced adult laborers. In several regions, officials also forced children to help toward the end of the harvest.

Freedom of Religion

Authorities imprison religious believers who practice their faith outside state controls. In August, the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders estimated that more than 12,000 persons are currently imprisoned on vague charges related to "extremism" or "anti-constitutional" activity, several hundred of them convicted in the previous year. Authorities also arbitrarily detain and fine Christians who conduct religious activities for administrative offenses.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Consensual sexual relations between men are criminalized, with a maximum prison sentence of three years. Activists report that police use blackmail and extortion against gay men, threatening to out or imprison them. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community members face deep-rooted homophobia and discrimination.

Key International Actors

During a June visit to Tashkent, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the Uzbek government to deliver on its international rights commitments, stating that "there can be no peace and development without human rights."

In a July 2015 review, the UN Human Rights Committee was highly critical of Uzbekistan, including concerns about politically motivated imprisonment, lack of accountability for the Andijan massacre, persistent torture, and lack of cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms. Since 2002, the government has ignored requests by at least 13 UN rights experts to visit the country.

The United States deepened its military cooperation with Uzbekistan, despite human rights concerns and a reduced need to rely on Uzbek assistance in transiting US troop supplies out of Afghanistan. In January, the State Department announced that Uzbekistan would receive more than 300 armored utility trucks, known as mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles, and 20 armored recovery vehicles – the largest single arms transfer ever made by the US to any Central Asian nation.

Two Congressional human rights bodies and the State Department marked the 10th anniversary of the Andijan massacre. US Secretary of State John Kerry met with President Karimov in Samarkand in November as part of a five nation Central Asia tour. While Secretary Kerry argued in a speech in

Kazakhstan that Central Asian governments should uphold human rights, he did not make any specific public remarks on Uzbekistan's human rights record during the Uzbek leg of his tour.

In July, the State Department upgraded Uzbekistan's placement in the Trafficking in Persons report, a global human trafficking report, from the lowest category – Tier III – up to Tier II, despite acknowledging the government's responsibility for widespread adult forced labor. For the seventh consecutive year, the State Department designated Uzbekistan as a "country of particular concern," due to its serial violations of religious freedom, but the White House waived the sanctions envisaged under the statute, citing national security grounds.

The European Union raised concerns regarding rights abuses in Uzbekistan in the March and June sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, but the EU's overall stance on human rights remained disappointingly weak. The European External Action Service failed to publicly mark the tenth anniversary of the Andijan massacre – an event that had triggered EU sanctions between 2005 and 2009. In contrast, the European Parliament marked the anniversary by referring to an October 2014 resolution highlighting ongoing abuses in Uzbekistan, and calling for the establishment of a special rapporteur on Uzbekistan at the UN Human Rights Council.

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