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Political context

Although in 2008, against the background of discussions regarding the possible lifting of EU sanctions, six of the 21 opponents and human rights defenders included on the list given to the Uzbek authorities by the European Union in 2007 were released, it is regrettable that the prisoners released in the context of the dialogue between the EU and Uzbekistan were treated during the negotiations as "special or exceptional cases" and that the release could therefore not be extended to other detainees. These fears were confirmed in October when two human rights defenders were sentenced to ten years in prison. Despite the passing of these sentences, the EU nonetheless decided to lighten the sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan at the end of 2005.¹

Rare improvements included the following: in February 2008 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) obtained permission to visit detention centres again for a limited period of six months (from March to September);² ILO Convention 182 on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour was ratified in June; and the authorities announced the imminent ratification of Convention 138 on the minimum employment age. In addition, since September child labour has been prohibited by Government decree.³ Capital punishment was also abolished on January 1, 2008. However, equal justice was not always guaranteed for persons who had previously been sentenced to death and whose sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment.

Detention conditions in Uzbek prisons remained appalling and torture was widely practiced, including on human rights defenders.

Overall, the authoritarian Uzbek regime pursued its policy of repression of opponents and civil society members. Over 5,000 people were deprived of their liberty on political or religious grounds.⁴ Freedom of expression was still muzzled, since the national media remained Government-controlled and access was blocked to some websites that criticised the authorities. Furthermore, a number of foreign media and networks, such as Deutsche Welle, the BBC, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) or the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR),⁵ were not always granted accreditation in 2008 in Uzbekistan, and Uzbek laws continued to permit the authorities to prosecute persons whose declarations were considered hostile to the regime.

Repression of peaceful rallies

In 2008, the authorities resorted again to numerous measures to prevent peaceful

human rights rallies from taking place: once again this year, the police made massive arrests of protesters, followed sometimes by violent interrogations and arbitrary detentions. For instance, Ms. Saida Kurbanova, a defender of peasants' rights from the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) in the Djizak region, was threatened with expulsion from her home in February 2008 for having organised and taken part in a series of peaceful demonstrations against the lack of domestic heating and electricity in the Djizak region. Unknown persons in plain clothes kept her under surveillance and the local authorities put pressure on her so that she leaves the region; she was also attacked in the street on several occasions, notably on February 22, 2008. Her family was also threatened.⁶ In addition, on May 13, 2008, the members of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan (*Pravozashchitni Alians Uzbekistan* – PAU) organised a rally to commemorate the third anniversary of the Andijan massacre. On the day of the rally, the police prevented Ms. Lyudmila Mingazova, Ms. Karima Kamalova, Mr. Akramhodzha Muhitidinov, Mr. Sahdmanbek Fazilov and Ms. Tatyana Dovlatova, PAU members, from leaving their homes and made threats against their families. Ms. Elena Urlaeva, President of PAU, was also remanded in custody in the morning by a member of the intelligence services and a police officer, and put under house arrest for the whole afternoon. Mr. Saidagzam Askarov, also a member of PAU, was arrested on his way to the rally location and forced to sign a statement obliging him to give up his human rights activities. In addition, the intelligence services prevented Ms. Jana Ignatenko and Mr. Alisher Mamadzhonov from laying a wreath of flowers in front of the "Monument to Courage" and tried to arrest Mr. Anatoli Volkov and Ms. Victoria Bajenova. Messrs. Rasulzhon Tadjibaev and Shurat Ahmadjonov were also arrested. All of these persons were quickly released during the day. Similarly, on December 6, 2008, Ms. Ada Kim, Ms. Victoria Bajenova, Ms. Liudmila Kouteпова, Ms. Tatyana Davlateva, Ms. Salomatoi Baimatova, Ms. Zulkumor Tuytchieva, Ms. Elena Urlaeva and Messrs. Oleg Sarapulov, Anatoli Volkov and Akromokhodzha Mukhitdinov, ten members of the Prisoners of Conscience Committee, "Ezgulik" and PAU, were arrested while taking part in a rally in front of the Prosecutor General's office before the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10 and Uzbek Constitution Day on December 8, in order to call for the release of defenders and political prisoners. The ten defenders were interrogated and ill-treated before being sentenced to fines of around 160 Euros, a sum equivalent to ten times the minimum wage, and released the same day.

Furthermore, during 2008 the homes of a number of defenders remained under surveillance and obstacles to their freedom of movement and preventive arrests increased, in particular before rallies were held. As an example, on March 16, 2008, the day before an internal HRSU meeting in Tashkent, the police arrested Mr. Mamir Azimov, President of HRSU in the district of Djizak, and prevented him from going to the meeting.⁷

Continued judicial harassment and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders

Although seven human rights defenders were released in 2008,⁸ including Ms. Mutabar Tadjibaeva, leader of the Ardent Hearts' Club and Laureate in 2008 of the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, who was released in June, numerous cases against human rights defenders continued to be cobbled together so that they could be arbitrarily detained and silenced. As an example, Mr. Akzam Turgunov, Founder of the "Mazlum" human rights centre, was arrested on July 11, 2008 for "extortion", tortured during his interrogation then sentenced on October 23 to ten years in prison. As of the end of 2008, he was still detained in penal colony UYa 64/49 in the town of Karchi (Kashkadarya province). Likewise, Mr. Salijon Abdurahmanov, a human rights defender and a journalist who is critical of the local authorities,⁹ was sentenced on October 10, 2008 to ten years in prison for "drug trafficking", a sentence that was upheld in appeal on November 20, 2008. As of the end of 2008, he remained detained in colony UYa 64/51 in Karchi.

Obstacles to leaving the country

In 2008, it was particularly difficult for defenders to obtain the required exit visa to leave Uzbek territory,¹⁰ as the authorities used various pretexts to prevent them from communicating with their colleagues abroad and from publishing information abroad on

the situation inside Uzbekistan. Thus, applications for exit visas made between February and April 2008 by Mr. Ikhtiyor Khamroev, a member of HRSU, Ms. Saida Kurbonova, Chair of HRSU in the Pakhtakor district, Mr. Ziyadullo Razakov, Chair of the International Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (IHRSU) in Djizak district, Mr. Mamir Azimov and Mr. Uktam Pardaev, Chair of the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan in Djizak district, were all refused, with no reason given, either because they had come out of prison or had problems with the police because of their human rights activities.¹¹

Urgent Interventions issued by The Observatory in 2008¹²

Names of human rights defenders	Violations	Intervention Reference	Date of Issuance
Ms. Mutabar Todjibaeva	Arbitrary detention	Open Letter to the authorities	February 15, 2008
	Release	Press Release	June 3, 2008
Mr. Ikhtiyor Khamroev, Mr. Saidjakhon Zaynobotdinov, Ms. Umida Niyazova and Mr. Bakhodir Mukhtarov	Release	Open Letter to the authorities	February 15, 2008
Messrs. Azam Formonov, Alisher Karamatov, Nasim Isakov, Djamshid Karimov, Rasulev Yuldash, Norboy Kholjigitov, Abdulsattor Irzaev, Habibulla Akpulatov, Abdurasul Abdunazarov, Zafar Rakhimov, Mamaradjab Nazarov and Dilmurod Mukhitdinov	Arbitrary detention	Open Letter to the authorities	February 15, 2008
		Open Letter to the authorities	October 10, 2008
		Press Release	December 15, 2008
Mr. Ulugbek Kattabekov and Mr. Karim Bobokulov	Arbitrary detention	Open Letter to the authorities	February 15, 2008
Messrs. Abdugafur Dadaboev and Musajon Bobojonov	Harassment	Open Letter to the authorities	February 15, 2008
Mr. Salijon Abdurahmanov	Arbitrary detention / Judicial harassment	Urgent Appeal UZB 001/0908/OBS 151	September 16, 2008
		Open Letter to the authorities	October 10, 2008
	Sentencing / Arbitrary detention	Urgent Appeal UZB 001/0908/OBS 151.1	October 14, 2008
		Urgent Appeal UZB 001/0908/OBS 151.2	November 20, 2008
		Press Release	December 15, 2008
Mr. Akzam Turgunov	Arbitrary detention / Torture and ill-treatment / Judicial harassment	Urgent Appeal UZB 002/0908/OBS 153	September 18, 2008
		Open Letter to the authorities	October 10, 2008

	Sentencing	Urgent Appeal UZB 002/0908/OBS 153.1	October 24, 2008
Mr. Yusuf Jumaev	Arbitrary detention	Open Letter to the authorities	October 10, 2008
		Press Release	December 15, 2008
Ms. Lyudmila Koutepova, Ms. Victoria Bajenova, Ms. Yelena Urlaeva, Mr. A. Mukhitdinov, Ms. T. Davlateva, Ms. Zulhumor Tuychieva, Mr. A. Volkov, Ms. S. Baymatova, Mr. O. Sarapulov and Ms. A. Kim	Arbitrary detention / Sentencing	Urgent Appeal UZB 003/1208/OBS 212	December 11, 2008
		Press Release	December 15, 2008

1 Only the arms embargo now remains in force.

2 The visits were stopped at the end of the six months period and, at the end of 2008, negotiations were under way between ICRC and the Uzbek authorities to decide on the next steps for cooperation concerning these visits. Between March and September, ICRC visited twenty detention centres and auditioned over a thousand detainees. See ICRC and the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU).

3 However, this had still to be put into practice since children took part in the latest cotton harvest in 2008.

4 See the association "Human Rights in Central Asia".

5 IWPR is an international network whose goal is to reinforce the capacity of local journalists for operating in conflict areas or in repressive countries. In Uzbekistan, IWPR helps local journalists to disseminate their writing within the country, the region and throughout the world.

6 See HRSU.

7 Idem.

8 In February 2008, Messrs. Saidjakhon Zaynobitdinov and Ikhtior Khamroev were released and the probation period that had been imposed on two other human rights defenders, Ms. Gulbahor Turaeva and Ms. Umida Niazova, released in 2007, was cancelled. Messrs. Dilmurod Mukhitdinov and Mamarajab Nazarov were released in October 2008.

9 Mr. Abdurahmanov wrote on sensitive issues such as social and economic justice, human rights, corruption, etc. He worked closely with Uz News, an independent on-line news agency, as well as freelanced for RFE/RL, *Voice of America* and IWPR.

10 Uzbek nationals need a visa, valid for two years, authorising them to leave the country.

11 See HRSU.

12 See the Compilation of cases in the CD-Rom attached to this report.