

# **IMPRISONED IN UZBEKISTAN: POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CASES**



**OCTOBER 28, 2014**

**Briefing of the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <[www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)>.

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The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <[www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov)>.

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**OCTOBER 28, 2014**

## **WITNESSES**

	Page
Steve Swerdlow, Human Rights Watch Central Asia Researcher, Director, Bishkek Office .	3
Sanjar Umarov, Former Political Prisoner .....	6
Aygul Bekjan, Daughter of Imprisoned Journalist Muhammad Bekjanov .....	9
Cathy Cosman, Senior Policy Analyst, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom .....	3

## **PARTICIPANT**

David Killion, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe .....	1
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**October 28, 2014**

## **Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC**

The briefing was held from 11:01 a.m. to 12:37 p.m. EST in 2200 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington D.C., David Killion, Chief of Staff of the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. KILLION. Good morning, everyone. I'm David Killion. I'm chief of staff of the Helsinki Commission—the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe. I would like to welcome everyone here today to this briefing on, “Imprisoned in Uzbekistan: Politically Motivated Cases.”

When the former Soviet republics joined the OSCE in 1992, many of us hoped the demise of communism meant that the practice of jailing people for their beliefs would be merely a vestige of an unhappy past. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience still exist in several of the countries that emerged from the USSR. Unfortunately, there are many individuals in jail in Uzbekistan who should not be. Uzbekistan has one of the highest numbers of persons imprisoned on politically-motivated charges. Human rights activists, journalists, and members of certain religious groups continue to fall victim to restrictive laws and policies that are allegedly aimed at ensuring stability in the country, but I believe may actually have the opposite effect.

A recent State Department assessment of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan said the country, quote, “remains an area of serious concern,” including restricted political and religious freedom, lack of an independent media, forced adult and child labor, allegations of torture and poor prison conditions. Uzbekistan has been designated a country of particular concern for religious freedom since 2006. Very disturbingly, there are consistent reports of widespread abuse and torture in Uzbekistan's prisons more than a decade after the U.N. Human Rights Rapporteur on torture concluded that torture was systematic in the country's prisons and detention camps.

Uzbekistan has no independent monitoring of places of detention. In April 2013, the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that it had taken the very difficult decision to terminate all visits to detainees in Uzbekistan, because it was unable to conduct such visits according to its standard working procedures, and as a result, these visits were pointless.

This is all the more disturbing in light of cases such as the recent death in custody of Nilofar Rahim Janav who was imprisoned in 2011 after being coerced into confessing that she was conducting terrorist activity on behalf of her father and husband, both Muslim theologians who Uzbek authorities do not like.

Rahim Janav died in prison a few weeks ago at the age of 37, and her family was pressured to bury the body quickly, without being able to conduct a postmortem, and without a proper investigation into the causes of her death.

Let me introduce our panelists today. Steve Swerdlow is Central Asia researcher in Europe and Central Asia in the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, focusing on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. He is an attorney with over 10 years of scholarly and human rights experience on Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia. His previous work includes the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, in the north and south Caucasus, CARE International in Georgia, the European Center for Minority Issues and the International Organization for Migration. Mr. Swerdlow received his J.D. from the University of California Berkeley School of Law, and his MA in international affairs from Columbia University's School of International Public Affairs.

Dr. Sanjar Umarov is a former political prisoner. Dr. Umarov is a physicist who worked for the government of Uzbekistan until 1991 when he moved to the private sector just before the fall of the Soviet Union and launched several successful enterprises. In 2005, Dr. Umarov announced his political ambitions and became the chairman of the Sunshine Coalition, a movement that promoted dialogue between Uzbek entrepreneurs and the Uzbek government. Shortly afterward, in 2005, he was arrested and given a sentence of 14 and one half years. He was amnestied on humanitarian grounds in November of 2009.

Aygul Bekjan is the daughter of imprisoned journalist Muhammad Bekjanov. Mr. Bekjanov worked for the opposition Erk newspaper, but had to flee Uzbekistan for Ukraine when Uzbek authorities conducted sweeping arrests following a series of explosions in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, which were blamed on the opposition. Mr. Bekjanov was abducted from his home in Ukraine by Uzbek security forces in 1999, when Aygul was just 18 years old, and Aygul has not seen her father since.

Mr. Bekjanov's health has deteriorated in prison, where he has contracted tuberculosis and was not properly treated for health problems reportedly related to beatings and abuse. Mr. Bekjanov was due for release in 2012, but his sentence was extended for five years for allegedly breaking prison rules.

Catherine Cosman is also with us today. She joined the staff of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom as its senior policy adviser for the OSCE region in late 2003. She previously served right here with us on the Helsinki Commission, working on issues relating to Soviet dissent, and has also worked at Human Rights Watch, where she wrote several studies on ethnic conflict in Central Asia and on human rights—also, in the National Endowment for Democracy, where she manages a Central Asian and Caucasus grant program, and RFE/RL, where she founded and edited "Media Matters" and (Un)Civil Societies. She received a BA in history from Grinnell College and MA and ABD in Slavic languages and literatures from Brown University.

So first, I'm going to ask Steve Swerdlow to show his film and then speak, followed by Dr. Umarov, Ms. Bekjan and Ms. Cosman. Then, we will open the floor to all of your questions and comments, so please be thinking during the presentations about how you

would like to engage our panelists, because we'd like to have a very interactive briefing here today.

Steve.

Mr. SWERDLOW. The Uzbek government has imprisoned thousands of people on politically motivated charges, some corruption. Some were journalists and they wrote articles raising sensitive issues. Others, though, landed in prison simply for exercising their religious beliefs.

Ms. COSMAN. Uzbekistan simply rejects all criticism of its human rights record, denies it has any political prisoners or religious prisoners. It simply says it has criminals who have violated the law.

Mr. SWERDLOW. Uzbekistan has been led the last 25 years by Islam Karimov. It's an authoritarian president, and he formerly was the Communist Party boss of Uzbekistan while it was still a part of the Soviet Union. President Karimov wields all the power in that authoritarian system. Individuals in prison on politically motivated charges experience a wide range of very serious human rights violations. From the very start of their cases, their rights are abused. They're denied access to counsel in the very beginning, the most crucial phase of their arrest and interrogation. We documented they are then often subjected to torture or ill treatment before trial and after trial.

Mr. SWERDLOW. Muhammad Bekjanov is the world's longest imprisoned journalist. He's now been in prison for 15 years.

In January 2012, just five days before he was set to be released, Muhammad Bekjanov had his sentence extended by Uzbek authorities for so-called violations of prison rules.

There are numerous persons imprisoned on politically motivated charges in the country, no sign that Uzbekistan is moving towards democratic reform, a sense that there is impunity for human rights abuses.

Ms. COSMAN. Uzbekistan has been important to the U.S., especially vis-à-vis the ongoing war in Afghanistan. We did have use of a military base there, and then it's railroad system has been important in helping to supply our troops in Afghanistan, so this has resulted in softening the U.S. criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights record.

Mr. SWERDLOW. If Uzbekistan refuses to release these people from prison, the United States and the European Union should start openly discussing some policy consequences. That means considering some kind of targeted sanctions, visa denials, asset freezes and they can seek at the Human Rights Council some form of accountability. They can create a special rapporteur devoted to Uzbekistan's human rights situation.

Mr. SWERDLOW. Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Ambassador Killion. My name is Steve Swerdlow. I want to start by saying I'm so pleased and honored to be sharing the panel today with two very courageous representatives of Uzbekistan's civil society, Sanjar Umarov and Aygul Bekjan, and also, of course, great expert Catherine Cosman. We're here today, I think, to shine a light on a crisis of politically motivated imprisonment. We are aware that Uzbekistan has one of the most atrocious human rights records in the world today, but what we tried to do with this particular report was reinvigorate the discussion, remind the world and policymakers in particular about the abuses being suffered by political prisoners in Uzbekistan and try to—through 34 current cases and 10 former political prisoner cases, try to draw some conclusions that would apply to the

roughly 10,000 or more persons that are jailed in Uzbekistan today on politically motivated charges, whether it's related to religion or human rights work, journalism or witnessing the Andijan massacre of 2005. But there are a number of grounds on which people are serving politically motivated terms in Uzbekistan.

I thought I might begin by explaining the title. We entitled it: "I will hold out until the very end." You've already heard two stories in the film. I think a third story helps bring together some of the main findings of the report. This is the story of a currently imprisoned human rights defender named Azam Farmonov. He's 34. He's the father of two children and was the chairperson of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan in Gulistan, and he spent his time representing the rights of farmers. He spent his time going to court to represent laypeople in various court cases. He was a public defender. He was arrested in 2006 in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre, when the government started imprisoning wide numbers of human rights activists and others.

His trial is a good example of how political prisoners experience the criminal justice system. Authorities held him and another human rights activist, Alisher Karamatov, incommunicado in the beginning of their detention after April 29, 2006. They were immediately subjected to torture during interrogation. Officers of the SNB, Uzbekistan's notorious security service agency, placed sealed gas masks on their heads to simulate suffocation, and beat their legs and feet, pressuring them to confess. Farmonov told his lawyer that he was beaten on the head with plastic bottles filled with water and that SNB officers threatened to drive nails into his toes and to harm his loved ones. During a search of his home that day, police beat Farmonov's wife, Ozoda. He was not represented by independent counsel at his trial. He was sentenced to nine years in the Jaslyk prison colony, which has been known for many years to be a site of torture in Uzbekistan.

At his trial, he said to his wife, after experiencing torture and really only being able to interact with her for a second: I'll hold out until the very end. That's where he is now, holding out until the very end, like so many of these prisoners. We documented 34 cases of political prisoners today, and I want to share with you some of the key findings, the key conclusions. I should say, of course, this list of 34 people is not exhaustive. Again, we're talking about a number of thousands, perhaps 10,000, perhaps. Some groups, the independent Human Rights Defenders Initiative led by Surat Ikramov in Tashkent, estimates that there may be up to 13,000 current political prisoners in Uzbekistan, but it's very hard to verify this given how closed Uzbekistan has come. But on these 34 cases, we were able to conclude that at least 29 of them had made credible allegations of torture or ill treatment during pre-trial custody or now imprisoned following their conviction. At least 18 have been denied access to counsel. Eight have been held incommunicado for some period of time. One case that's notable is the case of human rights activist who witnessed and documented mass grave sites filled with bodies after the Andijan massacre in 2005. He fled to Kyrgyzstan and was kidnapped, held incommunicado for a year. At least six of the 34 have been imprisoned for 15 years or longer. I think that's another notable aspect of politically motivated imprisonment in Uzbekistan, is the terms, the length of prison sentences is simply astounding. Muhammad Bekjanov is the world's longest imprisoned journalist, imprisoned almost for 16 years. There are others, like Samon Darkoniv, who was a member of Uzbekistan's first independent parliament, who's been in jail now for 22 years. Murod Juraev, another notable political prisoner, who's had his prison sentence extended numerous times, imprisoned since 1994.



At least nine of them are over 60 years old. This is significant why? Because the Uzbek government often speaks of the use of amnesties to release thousands of prisoners. There's been some discussion in recent years about reforms to the Uzbek criminal system and the use of amnesty as a humanitarian gesture. What we documented, though, is that persons imprisoned on politically motivated charges tend to be excluded from amnesties. If you're over 60 years of age, you should be slated to be immediately released. That also applies if you're a woman. Several of the prisoners in this report are women and have not been released. Eleven of them had their prison terms extended arbitrarily. When it comes to Uzbekistan, the country is so difficult to document and study, it is hard in a way to arrive at "new," quote-unquote, information about abuses.

But what this report I hope—I hope shows is that there's a pernicious, very specific practice—a very cruel practice of actually extending prison sentences once someone has been convicted on almost absurd, flimsy grounds, where prisoners are not informed—are not given meaningful opportunity or due process or notice of the violations they have committed in prison, which are then used as a basis to extend their sentence by six years, nine years, 10 years. These are called violations of prison rules. I'll talk a little bit more about what they are. That's a significant number—11 out of 34—14 if you include the former—the 10 former political prisoners whose cases we've documented.

At least 15 of them are currently suffering critical health problems such as tuberculosis, hypertension, heart attacks, ulcers. Nine have alleged that they've been denied access to urgent medical care. Four—I mentioned the Jaslyk Prison—four have served or are serving in the Jaslyk Prison. This is a prison that the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture has called to be closed as early as 2002, but remains open.

Five were kidnapped from the territories of other countries, including Aygul's father in Ukraine, but also Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In at least one case, Akramil Dashav, who is—according to the Uzbek government was a mastermind or the ideological inspiration behind the Andijan uprising, although he was imprisoned for six years prior to that, has been unheard or unseen for over four years, which constitutes a disappearance under international law and is a very serious crime.

Those are some of the highlights. Getting back for a moment to the arbitrary extension of prison sentences, I think this is a very important finding. The bases on which sentences can be extended: We found in the case of Moro Jariav, whose sentence has been extended four separate times now, it's ranging 20 years—one reason that he was imprisoned to an additional four years was that he was found to have had improperly peeled carrots in the prison kitchen. Some of the other reasons that we documented in this report for extending prisoner sentences are the failure to lift a heavy object, failing to properly place one's shoes in the corner, failing to properly sweep the cell, wearing a shirt and very absurd bases. This is a particularly cruel practice that we haven't been able to document in any other country in the world.

Compounding these abuses is an absolute lack of monitoring. As Ambassador Killion said, the International Committee for the Red Cross which is able to monitor prison conditions in many countries of the world took the very rare step in April 2013 to announce publicly—which it does not often do—that it was unable to monitor prisons—places of detention and prisons. That was simply because Uzbek government officials were violating the confidentiality of those interviews, but also in some cases—one—a few we documented

in this report, for example the case of journalist Suliman Abdul Rachmanov some of these prisoners were actually hidden from the ICRC, moved to other prisons as soon as officials learned that the ICRC was on the way to visit them, which is another extremely troubling sign.

So the problems have grown worse. In the meantime, Uzbekistan has not allowed a single U.N. Special Rapporteur to visit the country since 2002, which makes Uzbekistan somewhat of a record holder. Only Zimbabwe has denied more U.S. special procedures access to the country. So there are 11 outstanding requests over 12 years. At Human Rights Watch, we look across the world at the cooperation with U.N. mechanisms and we think that Uzbekistan's case deserves particular attention. We've asked and we are calling on the United States government, the European Union, to seriously consider the establishment of a special mechanism at the U.N. Human Rights Council that would be devoted to studying Uzbekistan's human rights situation, in particular also the conditions for political prisoners.

One of the really disheartening and difficult aspects of this story is the West and how it has, in some sense, turned a blind eye to the abuses in Uzbekistan. As Cathy mentioned in the film, Uzbekistan plays an extremely important geostrategic role in the war on terrorism and in the war in Afghanistan, I should say. With the drawdown of troops though,—we hope that the United States government will find an opportunity to increase the public diplomacy, more frequently raise the cases and the names of political prisoners in Uzbekistan—both in Tashkent, but also during the ABCs, the Annual Bilateral Consultations that are coming up—and support efforts such as the one we're calling for at the U.N. Human Rights Council.

One last point to make is that the Andijan anniversary—the anniversary of the Andijan massacre, one of Eurasia's most bloody massacres—is coming next May. That would be a logical moment for us to work towards to try to both see the release of all these 34 individuals and everyone on politically motivated charges, but to hold Uzbekistan accountable, both in the U.N. but also in bilateral negotiations, setting meaningful policy consequences if there's a lack of progress by that time. I think that would be a logical point at which to evaluate Uzbekistan's human rights situation. I'll end there. Thank you.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you, Steve. Dr. Umarov, the floor is yours.

Mr. UMAROV. First of all, I'm sorry for my bad English. Also, I may be a little bit long for me.

Mr. Moderator, I'd like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the leadership of the Helsinki Commission for organizing this briefing. In fact, this is my second opportunity to discuss my case at the commission event. Senator Cardin and Congressman Smith have taken an active interest for many years in Central Asia, and I know I am only one of the many individuals who have been helped, and even rescued, by their involvement and passionate commitment to human rights.

Today, I am filled with hope. This was not always the case. After being torn from my family, thrown into an open cell and exposed to the frigid Uzbekistan winter in my shirt sleeves; after being convicted for a crime I did not commit; after being kicked, beaten and tortured by guards and cellmates alike; after being gassed and choked and mentally tormented; indeed, after being denied nearly every human right that we're discussing here today I almost lost everything—my speaking voice, my sanity, my family, my life and, yes, my hope.

Then suddenly one day, I was set free. Yes, that morning I woke up as a prisoner and that evening my granddaughter, whom I had not held or seen since she was an infant, was bouncing upon my knee. This is a true story of what happens when hope is mobilized through perseverance. But it is not my story. It is the story of the cotton workers—no, the cotton slaves of Uzbekistan.

For the past 25 years, my beloved country was been under the rule of one man, Islam Karimov, the Communist Party leader under the former Soviet Union. Profits from growing cotton dominate Uzbekistan's economy and fuel corruption within the government. Farmers are compelled to grow cotton and sell it to the government for next to no money. Each year, Uzbekistan's government forces about 2 million people—including doctors, teachers and children—to pick the crop, and paying a minimum wage of less than a 7 cents per kilogram, while selling cotton for world price. This is happening today, right now.

Before prison, I had a good life, an amazingly charmed life, especially compared to those working in Uzbekistan fields in the cotton sector. After the fall of the Soviet Union, I saw an opportunity in the need to assist in modernizing my country. I helped found Uzbekistan's leading communications company, developed venture capital projects in energy and transportation industries, and founded an international business school in Tashkent.

I became a successful businessman in independent Uzbekistan, and I looked forward to finding new opportunities. Yet I could not turn a blind eye to what was happening in Uzbekistan's cotton fields. In 2003, I began dabbling in politics and I secretly helped to found the Free Peasant opposition party, an organization that was working to give farmers a voice and power over their own land.

I went into politics, not for the sake of power or ambition but in order to establish justice and order in my homeland. A very important role in the development of my character and world outlook was played by my family. My father, Gyas Jakubovich Umarov, in his scientific research, always pursued truthfulness a principle I inherited. There are a lot of people like me among Uzbekistan's intelligentsia. The trouble is that they are scattered, and if they try to act on their convictions they are brutally suppressed.

But after two long years nothing seems to change. I grow increasingly frustrated. That's when I knew I had to do something more. In early 2005, I decided to use my position and influence to form a new movement, the Sunshine Coalition, to promote dialogue with the regime, and openly pushed for socioeconomic and democratic reform.

A few months later, in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijon, thousands of citizens took to the streets in a peaceful protest against poor living conditions and government corruption. So what did the government do? Troops opened fire, gunning down and killing hundreds of men, women and children as they tried to flee. It was a massacre. Not surprisingly, the government tried to cover up the enormous scale of the violence.

But truth has a way of coming out, and although I understood it would be dangerous, I spoke out publicly about this massacre, criticizing Uzbekistan's government. Not long after this atrocity, I visited the United States seeking support for the Sunshine Coalition from Uzbek expatriates and U.S. officials. My wife and four of our five children had already moved here, in part because of what was happening back home.

A couple of days after returning to Uzbekistan, I received a phone call from a fellow opposition party member, who informed me that authorities were raiding Sunshine Coali-

tion headquarters. I rushed over, and when I arrived I heard a loud voice inside, but when I banged on the door no one would come out. I turned to leave and suddenly I was grabbed off the street in the broad daylight and stuffed into a car.

Next thing I remember was waking up in a cell with blood on my jacket. My mind was fuzzy for days after. They must have drugged me. There I remained for four months before my trial even began, being interrogated continuously and often beaten on the head. At one point a car backed up to my cell window and pumped in exhaust. I dropped down on my belly, pressed my mouth against the narrow space between my cell door and the floor, gasping for air, desperately trying to stay alive.

My trial was the next day, January 30, 2006, President Karimov's birthday. I was accused of creating an unsanctioned political organization, as well as a litany of other trumped-up charges. At that point I still had hope. I was a romantic. But then the judge ignored my lawyer and listened only to the prosecutor. It soon became clear that I wasn't going free. How I was supposed to endure another two, maybe even three years of this treatment? Then they read the sentence: fourteen-and-a-half years, for what?

I was sent to a prison colony and weekly placed in solitary confinement in a tiny cell with a concrete floor, an open toilet and no sink. I was kept there first for 17 days, then 15 days, but each time my stay was almost up—and, believe me, I counted every single day—officials would extend it for another two or three weeks. This happened over and over, my hopes of returning to the general prison population constantly crushed. This went on for 14 months.

It's very easy to go crazy in solitary. You dwell on things. You feel like you're losing your mind. I was not allowed any contact with my family. I could not even write to them. Any letter they wrote me were torn to pieces right in front of me by the prison guards. It was perhaps the worst torture I endured.

During my first year in prison, my son took the train to see me 20 times and 20 times was turned away. But the lowest point came in January 2008, when I was thrown in the "monkey cage," that cell I mentioned at the start of my talk, that was open to the elements. The first time I was put in there, I nearly froze to death. The temperature was routinely below freezing, maybe about minus 10 degrees Celsius, and all I had were light pants and a shirt, no shoes, no socks, to hat.

The second time they threw me in there because I refused to sign a bogus confession saying that the United States gave me \$20 million to overthrow Uzbekistan's government. My cellmates nearly beat me to death. They were ordered to try and make me sign. They broke my thumb and choked me permanently—and choked me, permanently damaging my vocal cords. But I refused to sign. They jumped on my shackled ankles, scarring me forever, but I did not sign.

It wasn't until three years into my imprisonment that I was finally allowed to see my wife, my daughters and my lawyer, but I barely recognized them. The torture had gotten to me and I had lost all hope that I would ever get out.

One day while I was in the prison hospital because my health had drastically deteriorated, I was summoned to the administration building. I assumed they were going to lengthen my sentence or deny me amnesty. But then I walked into the room. A man I learned was a judge called me Sanjar-aka, a term of respect, and within minutes I was freed, just like that. I could not believe it. Just when all seemed lost, I was free and reunited with my family, who had been debriefed a few days earlier by the U.S. Embassy.

How do I understand my arrest, conviction and torture? Uzbekistan political system refused to hear or even tolerate a sincere attempt at reform. I ended up a prisoner of conscience. I am not so naïve to think that everything in the country is a result of a direct order by the president. However, the system he created allows corrupt officials to abuse their power in his name.

As for my release, did the Uzbekistan's government suddenly see the error of its way? I wish it were so. No, I was freed because of the perseverance of others. What I didn't know while I was being subject to the worst kind of indignity was my wife and children had worked tirelessly for my release. They reached out to international human rights groups. They raised my case in U.S. Congress, including at the Helsinki Commission. They contacted the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the U.N. Human Rights Commission, the predecessor to the Human Rights Council.

I was freed due to strong international pressure, including a robust public campaign by human rights organizations and the efforts of diplomats. But I am one of the lucky ones. For the most part, international pressure on Uzbekistan has been sorely lacking. There are thousands of political prisoners in the world and millions of people forced into hard labor. But that can and must be changed.

That's why I continue pressing for reform in my native land even as I reside in freedom and security with my family near Memphis, Tennessee. In December there will be elections for Uzbekistan's parliament. Unfortunately, no party in parliament is independent of the ruling regime. In fact, no opposition parties are registered in Uzbekistan, which is why everyone, including the ruling regime, must understand that with power comes responsibility as well as the possibility for the well-being of its people in the near future.

I sincerely hope that the newly elected parliament, along with the current administration, will ensure fair election for a new president, which will take place in March 2015. But any government that is unable or unwilling to hear healthy criticism sooner or later will be doomed.

I would like to take this opportunity to call for immediate release of the 34 political prisoners listed in the excellent Human Rights Watch report, but that should only be the beginning. Many others are unjustly jailed in Uzbekistan—should be released. That will be a good and essential step toward national reconciliation.

In conclusion, let me again thank the commission's leadership and dedicated staff for organizing this briefing and inviting me to speak here today. I look forward to answering any question you might have.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you, Dr. Umarov, for your courage and your very powerful testimony. Now we'll turn to Ms. Bekjan for her testimony.

Ms. BEKJAN. Hello, my name is Aygul Bekjan. As you've heard, I'm a daughter of Muhammad Bekjanov, a political prisoner in Uzbekistan. I apologize; I have a little congestion going on and that's why I'm sniffing a lot.

My family and I, we've been on this journey for more than 15 years. We try to get my father out. But Sinjar Umarov called himself a lucky one. My father unfortunately is unlucky one. He became a political prisoner just because he exercised his basic human right, freedom of speech.

He worked as a journalist. He wrote about topics such as child labor in cotton fields, use of chemicals on cotton fields with children and the women present, human rights abuses, Aral Sea catastrophe, all of these things that Uzbek government would prefer not to talk about. Of course he paid a great price for that.

It's been 15 years since I saw him—more than 15 years. I have younger sisters. They were not as lucky as I am. I was 19 when he was arrested, or 18 when he was arrested, and actually was the lucky one to grow up with him and to know him. My younger sisters, they never had a chance.

We all became U.S. citizens, and I tried to open a visa to Uzbekistan to visit him but I was never able to because I was denied a few times. My mother is the only one who is retaining Ukrainian citizenship and that's why she's able to go there and see him occasionally. There's a few details that he shared about his imprisonment.

Right in the beginning, when they arrested him, he was held in the basements of Tashkent prison and he was beaten to half death. When he said that the only thing he was praying for was death. Imagine being tortured to the point where you can't remember your children's names for months. As he was recalling, he was laying in a pool of blood and pus with broken bones, with his teeth knocked out, and he tried to remember our names.

Then after Tashkent Prison, or spending a few months in the basements, they transferred him to Jaslyk, which is a concentration camp you can call it, where you go through life corridors, which is when prison authorities stand with sticks and they beat you senselessly until you just can't get up anymore. He spent some time there as well.

In 2012 we thought that we were finally going to see him because he was supposed to be released. My mother was in Uzbekistan and she was waiting for him to get out. We were just so excited, imaging how it's all going to happen, how we're going to see him after so many years. She spent three months in Tashkent and never even knew that there was another trial and they added five more years to his sentence. We learned that from U.S. Embassy later on, that he's been sentenced—even though she was going to the officials, making requests over and over only—she's been told to wait for a letter, for which we're still waiting. It's been two years.

I just hope that there's something that can be done. We tried. We tried so many times, but maybe this time, this year is going to be the lucky one. We still have hopes and we still would like our family to be united, to be together, because my father is a great man. He was the one who spoiled us. If you wanted to ask something, you go to your dad, not your mom. He was a peaceful journalist. I know I have say "peaceful" because apparently not everybody, I guess, know about that, but for me it was obvious that he was a peaceful journalist and that's all he did. All he did was just write the truth, and for which he paid a great price. So I'm along with Steve an intervention should be done in Uzbekistan, because this is unacceptable. This is inhumane and completely wrong, and I think it's also very important for U.S.—for Uzbekistan to be a more Democratic country, because we have to deal with them still.

So that would be it. Thank you.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you so very much, Ms. Bekjan for your very compelling testimony. Now we will, turn to our final witness, Cathy Cosman.

Ms. COSMAN. Helsinki Commission staff for organizing this important briefing, and of course—well, my words are not enough to pay tribute who have such direct personal

experience with this topic. I'd like to take a slightly different approach, at least in part, to the topic, because I think it's important to understand a bit about how religious prisoners end up in prison.—I'll just give a brief overview of some of the Uzbek laws that result in religious prisoners, and then I'll end with a few of the human stories of some of the religious prisoners. Only very few.

As we discussed, the government of Uzbekistan routinely denies that it has any political prisoners, but back in 2011, the respected Russian Human Rights Group Memorial declared that there are more political prisoners in Uzbekistan than in the right of the former Soviet Union combined. Current estimates of the total number of political prisoners in Uzbekistan range from 7,500 to 12,000. Religious prisoners comprise the overwhelming majority of political prisoners in Uzbekistan. Many were imprisoned because they reject state control over religious practice or because Uzbekistan's government claims they are associated with extremist groups.

Most observers believe that the only crime of many of Uzbekistan's religious prisoners is the independent practice and intensive study of Islam. Uzbekistan's 1998 law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations criminalizes unregistered religious activities, bans the production of any religious materials not approved by the state, prohibits children from participating in religious activities, only allows clerics to wear religious clothing in public and bans private religious instruction.

Members of unregistered religious groups—meaning that they have filed with the government for legal status—may be subject to massive fines and police raids, threats and use of violence as well as arrest and detention. I'd like to provide a brief look at the five criminal code provisions which may result in religious advocates being sent to prison. The criminal code distinguishes between improperly registered illegal groups and banned prohibited religious groups. Those who resume the activities of a religious or other group denied state registration may spend three years in jail. Those who repeatedly violate the severe state restrictions on religious literature or material face major fines or up to three years of so-called “corrective labor.”

Alleged members of groups deemed to be religious extremists, fundamentalists or separatists face up to 20 years in prison, while alleged organizers of illegal religious groups face up to five-year prison terms. The government of Uzbekistan bans certain religious Islamic political organizations it labels Wahhabi or jihadist, including Hizb ut-Tahrir, Akromiya, Tablighi Jamaat and Nour, none of which are on U.S. lists of terrorist groups. The government of Uzbekistan uses the term “Wahhabi” to refer to a wide range of Muslim groups, including political opponents, violent extremists, Uzbek citizens with foreign education, those who practice independent Islam and followers of three prominent Uzbek Imams such as Obidkhon Nazarov.

Of course, Uzbekistan does face genuine security threats from groups using violence in the name of religion. But the government uses sweeping laws against religious adherents and others who pose no real security threats. By relying on such policies, along with a glaring lack of due process rights and the all-too-frequent use of torture, as we have tragically just heard, Uzbekistan may be aiding the growth of the violent radicalism it is trying to combat.

I hope that this brief overview of the legal framework helps to explain why so many religious adherents are imprisoned in Uzbekistan. Now, I will turn to a very brief sum-

mary of the fate of a few who tried to flee Uzbekistan's religious repression, and of others who are religious prisoners there today.

Obidkhon Qori Nazarov, a prominent Tashkent imam known for his defense of religious freedom, fled Uzbekistan to avoid arrest in 1998. Sweden granted him political asylum in 2006. However, in February 2012, he was shot in Sweden and went into a coma. The imam's followers are convinced that the Uzbekistan government is responsible for his attempted assassination.

As was mentioned briefly before by Ambassador Killion, Nilofar Rahim Janav, 37, died on September 13th of this year in the women's labor camp near Tashkent. She had served almost three years of her 10-year term. Her family says that she was imprisoned to punish her husband and father, who live outside Uzbekistan. They are Muslim theologians, of whom Uzbekistan does not approve.

Her corpse was handed to her brother in Tashkent, and he was told to bury it without a postmortem exam. An Uzbek prison official did not respond when Forum 18 News Service asked if the prison authorities had even tried to save her life. Rahim Janav did not suffer from any chronic medical conditions before her arrest. Reportedly, however, in prison, she fell ill and was very frightened. She said she was often pressured to testify against her husband and father.

She did also go on television and discuss—the government tried to present her as having been forced to convert to Shia Islam. On September 25th, her widower, Younus Barhanov, published an appeal to the United Nations Human Rights Council, calling for an international investigation into her death and for the prosecution of those involved in her death.

Two Muslim sisters—Mehrinisso, Zulkhumor Hamdamova are held in the same women's prison where Rahim Janav died. Both sisters were arrested in Qarshi in 2009 for holding unauthorized religious meetings, even though Mehrinisso had taught Islam in an official madrassa in that city. In April 2010, the Hamdamova sisters and Shahlo Rakhmonova, a relative of the sisters, were sentenced to up to seven years in jail.

The trial was conducted with many legal and due process violations. When a group of women parliamentarians from Uzbekistan visited Washington several years ago, I asked them about the Hamdamova case and why the sisters were imprisoned for teaching girls about Islam. They scoffed, and said that the women were arrested solely because they had broken the law of Uzbekistan.

The relatives of the Hamdamova sisters are worried about their health, particularly that of Mehrinisso Hamdamova. Early this year, she was reported as needing urgent medical treatment, and an operation on an apparent myoma. Relatives feared for her life in prison conditions. In October, her relatives were allowed a three-day visit, as they had been previously allowed. They said their health seems to be a bit better now. Mehrinisso was not operated on but she was given some medicine. Her relatives recently petitioned Uzbekistan authorities to amnesty at least Mehrinisso Hamdamova so she could attend her children's wedding.

Khayrullo Tursunov and his family escaped to Kazakhstan in 2009, fearing punishment for their peaceful practice of Islam in their hometown, also in Karshi. His wife and children were granted refugee status in a third country but Tursunov was arrested by the Kazakhstan authorities at Uzbekistan's request, and he was extradited back to Uzbekistan in March 2013, despite a U.N. Committee Against Torture appeal. He stood trial



for alleged religious extremism and is currently serving a 16-year prison term. Now it seems that the Uzbek authorities have tried to infect him with tuberculosis by placing him in an infected cell. While prison officials have claimed to Forum 18 that Tursunov is now cured of TB, this alleged cure has taken place in a remarkably short period of time.

I have described only a few of the hundreds of known human stories of the religious prisoners of Uzbekistan. I should end by noting that in 2006, the U.S. government has designated Uzbekistan as a country of particular concern—CPC—for its systematic egregious and ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief. I just also note that since 2009, the U.S. government has placed an indefinite waiver on any punitive sanctions in connection with Uzbekistan's CPC status.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to a Q&A session.

Mr. KILLION. Thanks to all the panelists for your presentations. They were extremely helpful, all of them. Before I turn it over to the audience—I hope we'll have a lot of questions today—let me just first ask Steve and Cathy to talk a little bit about the record of the United States government and the State Department in engaging Uzbekistan directly and through international mechanisms—international organizational mechanisms to confront the human rights problems we're discussing today in Uzbekistan.

Steve, of course you had a picture of the map of the region with a bright green light blinking, indicating the supply routes during the war in Afghanistan. Obviously that is in transition now. Perhaps you could comment on the past, the present and what you—what you see in the future.

Mr. SWERDLOW. Sure. This event is timely because there's been a review of U.S. policy that's been underway for some months now in connection with the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan, and a sense that there's grasping for a new approach. A new policy has to be formed, something that is not as tied to the war in Afghanistan, because Uzbekistan has to be dealt with on its own terms, a country of 30 million people, the question being, should 30 million Uzbeks feel that their interests are the priority of Washington, or is it the interests of one man and clique around him that continues to engage in such egregious abuses?

I think that is a question that confronts Washington. It's a question that implicates the long-term interests of the United States. You cannot have a stable relationship with a dictatorship engaged in such atrocious abuses for so long. It's a recipe for disaster. I think with the NDN drawing down—of course it's still relevant—there has to be a harder bargain that's driven by Washington with Tashkent, and we think that that's possible.

One anecdote which I think is telling is when I was in Tashkent, then-Secretary of State Clinton was on her way to Tashkent. She made a statement the day before she arrived that she—a public statement that she was going to raise imprisoned human rights activists. The next day I got to meet that human rights activist that was freed, one person freed. His name was Farkhad Mukhtarov. He's in our report.

That's a small example, but it's worth noting. It's very important, to compare the period when relations were, according to many, at their worst between the U.S. and Uzbekistan, which was after the Andijan massacre up until about, let's say, 2007 when things started to warm. Andijan started to pick up. That is a period when Leahy amendment restrictions banned the provision of military assistance to Tashkent, which was of

course maddening to the regime, symbolically important. It made Uzbekistan somewhat of a pariah.

This is also the time that the EU had sanctions on Uzbekistan, one of the first countries it had imposed sanctions on as a collective body. But guess what? There were about 25 political prisoners released in this worst period of U.S.-Uzbekistan relations. There was more. There was the ICRC; there was Human Rights Watch on the ground; there were political prisoners being released at a faster pace. What's happened since the waiver of the Leahy amendment restrictions since 2011 and the lifting of EU sanctions since 2009? A trickle of political prisoners have been released, one a year approximately.

I want to recognize the great work that the State Department does on—especially on the political prisoner cases, raising them. Sanjar Umarov is a living testament to that success, as was Yusuf Juma and many others. I want to recognize that and really emphasize how much we deeply appreciate that. What we would like to see is more of a combination and perhaps more of a movement towards a recognition of the absolute, the fundamental lack of progress on this issue by the U.S. supporting, in a more public way, a U.S. Human Rights Council initiative.

One other idea Cathy, you mentioned the CPC designation. What that does envision ultimately if there's no progress are sanctions. The trafficking designation that—the Trafficking in Persons Report—the Trafficking in Persons Report of the State Department has placed Uzbekistan as a so-called Tier 3, the worst of the worst countries in terms of its use of forced labor. That also, ultimately, if there's no progress, envisages sanctions.

Our thinking on that is that there need to be some difficult, sober conversations, some of them held hopefully in a more public way, that signal to the Uzbek government, that people like the head of the SNB, people like the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other agencies that are engaged in very egregious systematic abuses could also be placed on lists of not traveling to the United States, having assets frozen, and certain signs that, in some ways symbolic, would, I think, really signal to Uzbekistan that things need to change and they need to change now.

Mr. KILLION. Cathy.

Ms. COSMAN. Well, I'll be brief. I agree with what Steve said. The CPC mechanism, it's significant that no sooner was the designation made than a few days later it was announced yet again all sanctions have been waived. I should also mention that all sanctions have been waived against Turkmenistan, which was this year, for the first time, named to CPC.

Interests of the post-Afghanistan situation or I should say post-U.S. and NATO involvement in Afghanistan, that situation is outweighing, by far, the long-term human rights concerns, including of course forced labor, which also exists in Turkmenistan, I should add, as a main concern of the U.S. government. Of course the U.S. government has to balance different kinds of interests, but I wish that we could be a little more forthcoming in a public way.

Mr. KILLION. Let's turn to the audience. Who would like to go first? Please. When folks ask questions, if you could identify yourself by giving us both your name and your affiliation, your organization. I'm sorry; and also if you could come up to the middle of the room to the microphone, we'd appreciate it.

QUESTIONER. Hi. I'm Joanna Kranak. I'm an intern at Representative Gwen Moore's office and I have a question. Ms. Cosman mentioned that in Uzbekistan there are more

political prisoners just in that one country than the entire former Soviet Union combined. Is there some quality of Uzbekistan that makes it more unique in that area?

Ms. COSMAN. Well, that's one thing I tried to describe. That's one reason I structured my comments in the way that I did, was to describe the laws, meaning that the potential for being charged with a crime is very wide-ranging in Uzbekistan. Tragically, I have to say that many other post-Soviet countries seem to have been now taking the Uzbekistan religion law as a model. So, for example, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, which used to have fairly liberal religion laws, now have moved in the—very far in the direction of the Uzbek religion law, and hence the potential for religious prisoners has also increased and actually also happened.

As far as Turkmenistan is concerned, the government policy of clamping down on any information about that country is so successful that it's very difficult to know what's going on in that country. Only the best-organized group, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, manage to get out information about what's actually happening inside their communities, and they're usually having a lot of problems. They're sort of an old adage in human rights circles that the less you know, the less information, it often is linked to the worst situation, not when there's the most information.

Mr. SWERDLOW. I might add just a little to say that, you know, Uzbekistan obviously is the largest of the populations in Central Asia, 30 million people. I heard one statistic that every fifth family—or I heard even every third family has some connection, some member of their family serving in either the police, the military police, the army, the SNB. It's a very wide-ranging security apparatus.

Uzbekistan really meets the definition of a police state. While you have authoritarianism in Kazakhstan and you have it emerging even more, certainly well-entrenched but emerging even in more scary fashion in Tajikistan now, Uzbekistan sort of in a way, as Cathy said, pioneered many of the tactics we're now seeing played out in Azerbaijan, other parts of the former Soviet Union. In addition to the religion laws, there were very significant waves of repression that added to the ranks over the years. So in 1992, right out the gate, Islam Karimov drove into exile and imprisoned hundreds of the secular opposition and drove them out of the country. Then by the end of the '90s, that's the beginning of the campaign against religion, which really picks up steam after 9/11, as Karimov was able to brand what he's doing in terms of the war on terrorism. Then you have the Andijan massacre. At least 300 or so of the political prisoners related to the Andijan events were witnesses to the events.

Then you have this long period of a deep freeze, which is so frustrating, of 10 years now of a sort of steady pattern of arrests, maybe we would say we've estimated 2(00) to 300 new cases a year of religious persecution, and new categories always being added; so those people that are associated with the Turkish Lyceum, called the Nursi readers; there's been an upswing in espionage allegations also, with the sort of spy mania that comes with a country closing in the way it does after Andijan. So, many different groups. We try to put, you know, them into different categories here in the report.

Ms. COSMAN. Sorry, I did want to also mention, since you asked about all of the former Soviet Union, we have to mention Russia. In Russia, the religion law is fairly liberal—I mean, fairly—but there is an extremism law which is very wide, and most of the religious groups that are suffering in Russia suffer from the extremism law, and not only religious groups, but that's used as a net to catch a large number of people. In Russia

so far, for religious groups, it's mainly Jehovah's Witnesses and followers of Said Nursi, this Turkish theologian. But others are increasingly being caught up, including a Russian Orthodox who belongs to an alternative to the Moscow Patriarchate, and he runs a website. He's currently on trial for extremism.

Mr. KILLION. What's the history of the U.S. engagement of the issue of human rights violations in Uzbekistan at the Human Rights Council, and the record of other democracies in challenging Uzbekistan's human rights record at the council? Is there any history of resolutions being drafted and debated?

Mr. SWERDLOW. Well, you know, the Human Rights Council's a young institution, as Dr. Umarov mentioned. It's come out of the Human Rights Commission. So we view Uzbekistan in a way as a test case for the legitimacy of the council. As I said, Uzbekistan holds a record in the number of U.N. special procedures that it has denied access to the country. I should say the U.S. government issued a good statement in the September session of the U.N. Human Rights Council, which we appreciated, that mentioned the issue of political prisoners.

But it's important to understand that I think Central Asia as a region has never really been addressed in the U.N. Human Rights Council. That's why we think it would be important—not just for Uzbekistan but also for Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, to a region that seems to be innovating, bequeathing a gift of new and different types of authoritarianism to the rest of the world—it would be important for that whole region to understand that it cannot escape scrutiny in Geneva and in New York, and it can be and should be an object of investigation.

I should say that the North Korea inquiry that was established is a really good example because there you have a closed country, thousands of victims, and really no hope of that inquiry being able to visit North Korea, but yet we saw that the inquiry gave a real voice to thousands of victims and it has added momentum to the cause of improving human rights there. So we see that as an important lesson for Uzbekistan.

Ms. COSMAN. I wanted to add, not on U.N. but on OSCE. I welcome the fact that ODIHR has moved the freedom of religion portfolio back to human rights from the tolerance unit, where I think it belongs. I hope that the ODIHR will increasingly pay attention to the severe problems faced by religious communities in Central Asia and post-Soviet countries, because until now it has mainly been concerned with the problems of discrimination against Muslims in Western Europe. That's not to say that's not a valid issue, but I think as we've heard, by comparison—well, there simply is no comparison.

Mr. KILLION. Dr. Umarov.

Mr. UMAROV. I think what is discussed here in Helsinki Commission, very good if U.S. embassy in Tashkent would deliver this information to minister of foreign relations of Uzbekistan, because when they receive this through embassy, U.S. embassy, is different than they receive it just from the media, or this is something official. It's very good because State Department is also participating in this commission. I think it would be very good, our U.S. embassy in Tashkent to deliver all what is discussed here, because otherwise, Uzbek government may say, we don't know what's happening in D.C., you know? It's just excuse to them and maybe relate to it a little bit.

Ms. COSMAN. If I can add also just on Kyrgyzstan, since we haven't mention that in the Central Asian context, it's currently at a very important point because there's a very restrictive, to put it mildly, draft religion law currently under consideration, and

December 1st is a key date for consideration of the next phase of that draft religion law. I think it would be very good if there could be official calls to hold another roundtable to discuss the draft religion law.

I happened to be in Kyrgyzstan and took part in a roundtable discussion which was literally called—the draft was issued midnight the day before the roundtable, and it was purely by chance that I took part in the roundtable, as did several other international representatives. More to the point, local religious communities also just, you know, found out by chance. I think it would be very important not only to have an international legal expert there on the draft religion law, but also to call for the Kyrgyz government to organize around another roundtable on the law.

Mr. UMAROV. Also about religious prisoners, what was—when I was in the prison I contacted also to prisoners who, for example, in prison colony, was around maybe 300 religious prisoners. I spoke to some of them. Mainly it was Hizb-ut-Tahrir, under Hizb-ut-Tahrir. They called themselves brother. Because they know that I came from the United States. Well, my family lived United States. They asked many questions about United States. You know, they were very interested.

When I told them what in United States you may see, in one kilometers, the church, they was happy. These Muslim prisoners who jailed as extremists was happy to know that in United States many church, because they think that United States is godless country because they do not travel abroad like, for example, like we.

We're traveling and we know what is democracy, what is United States or European country. But the many people who are jailed in Uzbek prison as religious prisoner, they do not move. They do not traveling. They receive only information through official media in Uzbekistan or through propaganda. I mean, even religious propaganda.

So I don't know. It was very surprising to me to see their reaction to this because, you know, in Uzbekistan four official parties, and all official parties has the name of democracy in the name, democratic party. All the four official parties is democratic party. In constitution you may find the word "democracy," I don't know, maybe in each paragraph.

They think, because they're jailed under democracy—democracy, yeah, because all party—ruling parties are democratic and the constitution is democratic, so they think this is a democracy. The regime in Uzbekistan is a democracy, they think, because they don't know what is a democracy meaning. We know, yeah. We're visiting, we're traveling abroad, but many people who are jailed for religion subject, they don't travel a lot. They don't see what is democracy is really. So they think this is democracy, regime in Uzbekistan.

Mr. KILLION. One last question from the audience? Please.

QUESTIONER. Thank you. Jeff Goldstein from the Open Society Foundations.

Over the last several years, the U.S. government officials have told us that the top two human rights issues they raise in all of their meetings with Uzbek counterparts are forced labor and religious freedom. So in relation to that, two questions: Are those right priorities, in your view, because the issue of political prisoners, although it's related to religious freedom, is not on that list.

Secondly, we have seen some movement, forward and backwards, on the issue of forced labor but none on the issue of religious freedom. Why do you think that is? Does

it have more to do with the tactics the U.S. government is pursuing, or does it have more to do with the Uzbek government attitude towards these issues?

Mr. KILLION. Cathy, do you want to start?

Ms. COSMAN. Thanks, Jeff. I can always rely on you for an interesting question.

I think the reason that there's no progress on religious freedom is precisely because, from the Uzbek perspective, or the, I should say, the Uzbek official perspective, they're mainly concerned with maintaining control and staying in power so they can continue their corrupt and other ways. I think they see religious groups as the greatest potential for mass mobilization and mass protest potentially as a countervailing political force inside the country, which might eventually result in the end to their power. That's why I think it's viewed as a greater political threat.

Of course it's a very short-term view because, as I tried to show, I think their policies may result in radicalization because of the extreme cruelty with which people are treated who are just trying to practice rights that, you know, should be totally normal, and which are in most cases peaceful.

Of course, forced labor is a very important issue. I have the impression that there's been a pretty effective international campaign on that front, perhaps more effective than on religious freedom, although I hate to admit that. But Steve, I think, has been more involved in this other issue.

Mr. SWERDLOW. I was remiss in not also recognizing the dedicated staff of the Helsinki Commission. I wanted to thank you in particular, Janice, for organizing this.

You know, to back up for a second, when we talk about religious freedom, it's a big issue. One thing that strikes me when I often discuss this with different policymakers is that there are differing definitions of what is meant by progress on religious freedom and what this large concept can encompass.

One of the things we tried to do in the report, which I hope will be helpful, is we tried to show how different categories of political prisoners overlap, and often they overlap with religion. It would be more precise to say that most of the religious prisoners are prisoners convicted on ill-defined, over-broad charges of threatening the constitution, which in many ways harkens back to the Soviet articles, criminal articles, of threatening the order, threatening—I can't remember the exact definition, but Cathy knows them well.

So the word "religion" actually doesn't even appear. The word "extremism" does, which is not defined. The word "terrorism" does, which is not defined. Came to the conclusion that those, quote, unquote, "religious articles" really are—that is the definition of politically motivated—a politically motivated charge, one that punishes free expression. That can be freedom of belief and practice of one's worship, but it can also be freedom of speech.

At the core of that issue is the Uzbek's government's unwillingness to allow freedom of expression writ large. That's where we've seen no issue. That ties it—no progress. That ties back to Andijan and the response and the unwillingness to even investigate what happened that ties into the ongoing persecution and crackdown of human rights groups. It ties into the issue of the government's unwillingness to register even a single NGO since 2002. That's a long time to not make any progress. It ties to the issue of not a single newspaper being able to function independently of the government—RFERL, BBC, VOA all being shut down and kicked out of the country.

These are things that really are part of the same issue, which is freedom of expression. And so I think the—I think the U.S. government needs to place more emphasis on that issue. And, you know, some of the political prisoners in this report, again, I want to say they illustrate the overlapping nature of this issue, that you can't deal with one without the other.

Bekjanov, a journalist but accused of threatening the constitutional order, which puts him in the category of the religious prisoners. Hamdamova sisters, members of a human rights organization but charged on religious charges of teaching Islam. Also Hirello Hamidov, an enormously popular figure who discussed religion as a sports journalist. Is he a journalist or is he a religious prisoner? There is only going to be, I think, progress on this issue when we start speaking in more plain terms and direct terms about the freedom of expression.

Finally, I would agree with Cathy. I think that what perhaps makes the cotton issue different is that there's been the combination of a public campaign with private diplomacy, which you don't see mobilized in the same way on the other issues. I think that says that pressure works. Pressure works. If we raise the names of these political prisoners as often as we can, in every context—in Geneva, in New York, in D.C., at the ABCs, everywhere—we will see progress. And we will see—it's got to come with a carrot and a stick together. But I think we will see movement on this issue.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you very much. Before we close, I certainly want to see if—give an opportunity to Ms. Bekjan to see if there's anything that you would like to say about U.S. policy. Your father is the journalist who may be the one who's been detained longest in the world. Press freedom is a major focus of our human rights and foreign policy today. Yet, people don't normally think about Uzbekistan when they think about freedom of the press and think about journalists working in dangerous conditions or those who have been imprisoned. What is—what is the solution? How do we end your pain after all these long, long years?

Ms. BEKJAN. I think Steve made a really good point in the beginning of his speech, that there should be some action from the U.S. government because I consider the U.S. government has the most power and they can do the most. There's one thing that I forgot to mention about my dad, that was the last visit with my mom.

He jokingly suggested that he found a very decent guy for my younger sister, because he's, of course worried. He wants a better future for all of us. But he's a political prisoner who is in the same prison with him. Of course, my mom rolled her eyes and they had a laugh about it. But he said, unfortunately, in Uzbekistan, being a political prisoner is like a stamp of decency. That means you're a decent person, if you've been a political prisoner. So this is the sad state of Uzbekistan today.

I am asking U.S. government, of course, intervene. State Department, I know, is working—or say that they are working on this case and many other cases. I also wanted to mention that Yusuf Razimaradov is another longest-held journalist along with my dad. My dad received an award—the freedom of press in 2014, which I received in Washington, D.C. this spring. I hope that would also somehow—will move things along. I really hope so.

Also Yusuf Razimaradov, I really wish that he wasn't forgotten as well, because unfortunately his wife divorced him. She was not willing to wait for him for so many years.

Now he's just I guess left out in a vacuum and nobody really talks about him anymore. That's quite sad, too. Thanks.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you very much. We'll give you the last word, Mr. Umarov.

Mr. UMAROV. I want just to mention what this year will be March next year will be a presidential election in Uzbekistan. Mr. Karimov is already 25 years in the power. I would like to ask if it's possible to State Department and Helsinki Commission make the statement what they will not tolerate the re-election of current president for next term, because in 2005 I asked the middle level State Department charged for Central Asia. We did not ask him for arms. We do not ask him for money. We only ask him for the statement of the State Department what they will not tolerate of re-election of Karimov.

The constitution because under Uzbek constitution it's only two times he can be elected. Now he already in his third term. In this case I am sure he will be interested, motivated to release all the political prisoners before end of his term and end the tortures.

Mr. KILLION. Thank you very much. Thank you to all of our panelists for helping to draw Washington's attention, and hopefully the world's attention, to this ongoing human rights problem. I also want to thank Janice Helwig from the Helsinki Commission staff who's sitting up here with the panel, who organized this important briefing and is celebrating 20 years with the CSCE. Thank you very much, Janice.







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