



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Civil and Political Rights in Uzbekistan and Central Asia: Implications for Post-2014 U.S. Foreign Policy

Thursday, June 25, 2015
2:00 pm – 4:00 pm
2123 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks

Welcome everyone, and thank you for attending today's hearing, *Civil and Political Rights in Uzbekistan and Central Asia: Implications for Post-2014 U.S. Foreign Policy*. I would like to welcome our distinguished witnesses who are leading efforts in the United States government and civil society to promote human rights in Central Asia. I would also like to thank the staff of the Commission for organizing this important hearing.

Today's focus on civil and political freedoms in Uzbekistan and Central Asia comes at a timely moment. With the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, we have an opportunity to make human rights a priority in U.S. foreign policy towards the region. While Central Asian states have been key partners in providing logistical and operational support to U.S. troops in Afghanistan, the exigencies of the war have overshadowed serious human rights abuses occurring in all five countries. These abuses must be brought to light and addressed, because they also represent a serious threat to long-term security and prosperity in the region.

All the Central Asian states, to varying degrees, systematically deny their citizens fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Uzbekistan's authoritarian government routinely detains and tortures human rights activists, journalists, religious believers, artists, and other perceived critics of the government. According to some international human rights observers, thousands of people are imprisoned on politically motivated charges.

Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan are also ruled by authoritarian regimes that restrict freedoms of speech, press, association, and religion, and deny due process of law. Very

little progress has been made towards creating open and accountable governments that protect basic rights. While Kyrgyzstan has a more democratic form of government, it is at risk of reversing this progress as its legislature considers measures that would restrict the space for civil society, including a prohibition on free speech for those promoting more positive attitudes toward non-traditional sexual relations.

In the next phase of our foreign policy towards Central Asia, it is important that we seriously engage with the region's governments to improve the poor human rights conditions in each country. Respect for human rights – including the right of citizens to express their grievances and peacefully advocate for changes in or with their government – is the best strategy to address the security challenges we face today. History has shown us again and again that internal repression makes countries vulnerable to instability, extremism, and conflict. So we are here today to discuss and explore way the U.S. can contribute to promoting civil and political rights in Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region. I look forward to hearing your analysis and recommendations.