

Chairman McGovern, distinguished Members of Congress, congressional staff, fellow panelists, and honored guests:

Before I begin, I want to express my deep gratitude to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for carrying forward the extraordinary legacy of Congressman Tom Lantos. As the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the United States Congress, he understood that silence in the face of injustice comes at an immeasurable human cost. His unwavering commitment to human dignity and freedom continues to inspire people around the world.

Thank you for keeping that torch of justice burning for ensuring that those whose voices are silenced, imprisoned, or forgotten still have a place to be heard. Today, I am honored to speak on behalf of the people of Karakalpakstan,

Three years ago, peaceful demonstrators in Karakalpakstan were killed, gravely wounded, detained, and disappeared while defending rights guaranteed by their own Constitution.

Today, many of those responsible remain in positions of power, while people who demanded justice remain imprisoned. Thank you for giving the people of Karakalpakstan an opportunity to be heard before the United States Congress.

Before discussing political prisoners, it is essential to understand what Karakalpakstan is, and why its constitutional status matters.

Karakalpakstan is not simply another administrative region of Uzbekistan. In fact, Karakalpakstan was the second republic that declared its independence from the USSR, after Lithuania did. Its relationship with Uzbekistan was established through an interstate agreement concluded in 1993 for a period of twenty years.

The Republic of Karakalpakstan is a sovereign republic with its own Constitution, Parliament, flag, national anthem, and coat of arms. The Constitution of Uzbekistan itself recognizes the sovereign Republic of Karakalpakstan, and the right of the people of Karakalpakstan to determine their future through a nationwide referendum.

That agreement was temporary. It was not intended to settle the relationship permanently.

Its twenty-year period ended in 2013. Yet no transparent negotiations followed, no new agreement was presented to the people, and no public constitutional process was permitted to determine what the relationship between the two republics should become after the agreement expired.

Instead of answering these legitimate constitutional questions through dialogue and the rule of law, the authorities made the subject dangerous to discuss.

People who peacefully raised questions about the expired agreement, Karakalpakstan's sovereignty, or its constitutional right to a referendum faced surveillance, intimidation, criminal prosecution, imprisonment, or forced exile. Karakalpak families and advocates have also reported cases in which individuals disappeared or vanished from public life after challenging the official position. Calling publicly for the exercise of Karakalpakstan's constitutional rights has repeatedly resulted in enormous pressure and, in many cases, prison sentences.

The authorities did not resolve the constitutional question. They tried to silence everyone who asked it.

For nearly a decade after 2013, this unresolved issue remained buried beneath fear and repression.

Then, in 2022, rather than opening a lawful dialogue with the people of Karakalpakstan, the Uzbek government proposed constitutional amendments that would have removed references to Karakalpakstan's sovereignty and eliminated its constitutional right to determine its future through a referendum.

Thousands of ordinary people came into the streets of Nukus. They were not demanding violence. They were not attempting to overthrow the government. They were demanding that the Constitution be respected. They were defending rights already guaranteed to them by law. Bloody July did not begin because people suddenly became dissatisfied. It was the culmination of decades of political marginalization, nearly ten years of unanswered questions following the expiration of the twenty-year agreement, and the steady dismantling of Karakalpakstan's sovereignty, identity, and political voice. On July 1 and 2, 2022, Uzbek security forces used unjustified and lethal force against mainly peaceful demonstrators. Human Rights Watch documented the use of explosive weapons that detonated near or in contact with protesters, causing deaths and horrific injuries.

The Uzbek government says that 21 people were killed. But that is the government's figure—not an independently verified accounting of the full human cost. Survivors, witnesses, victims' families, and Karakalpak human rights defenders believe that the true number of people killed may have been substantially higher, possibly in the hundreds. Because the authorities restricted access, controlled information, pressured families, and never permitted a genuinely independent international investigation, the full number of those killed, wounded, detained, or disappeared remains unknown. Amnesty International noted from the beginning that restrictions on access made independent verification extraordinarily difficult. To this day, no complete and credible list of victims has been released. There has been no independent international investigation into the chain of command. There has been almost no meaningful accountability for the deaths and grave injuries. Families continue to live with unanswered questions. The government wants the world to remember a number.

We ask the world to remember the human beings whose names may have been excluded from that number. Instead of holding accountable those responsible for the violence, the authorities prosecuted people who defended the constitutional rights of Karakalpakstan.

The most prominent among them is Dauletmurat Tajimuratov. Dauletmurat is a Karakalpak lawyer, journalist, and human rights defender. He peacefully called upon citizens to defend Karakalpakstan's constitutional status. He was violently arrested, and United Nations experts received credible allegations that he was physically assaulted, threatened, tortured, and subjected to degrading treatment. He was later sentenced to sixteen years in prison. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that his imprisonment was arbitrary and called for his immediate release. Uzbekistan did not release him. Instead, the authorities brought another case against him, imposed an additional sentence, and subjected him to an even harsher prison regime. Human Rights Watch described the later prosecution as another conviction of a Karakalpak lawyer already serving a sixteen-year sentence. His family and human rights defenders report that his condition has deteriorated dramatically. He has suffered severe weight loss. He has been denied adequate and independent medical care. United Nations experts have expressed serious concern for his health and safety and have called upon Uzbekistan to protect him. Dauletmurat's case is not an isolated injustice.

It has become a symbol of what has happened to Karakalpakstan.

A number of Karakalpaks have already died in custody under deeply troubling circumstances. These deaths have created an enormous fear among Karakalpaks. When prisoners die behind bars and the circumstances are not independently investigated, every political prisoner understands the message. Every family understands the danger. Today, there is profound concern for the life of Dauletmurat Tajimuratov.

The question many Karakalpaks are afraid to ask aloud is painfully simple: Will Dauletmurat become the next Karakalpak political prisoner to die in custody?

Congress has an opportunity and I believe a responsibility to help ensure that he does not. The repression did not end when the streets of Nukus were cleared. It entered people's homes, workplaces, schools, and phones.

Today, social-media activity relating to Karakalpakstan is closely monitored. Authorities have targeted people for discussing Bloody July, Karakalpak sovereignty, political prisoners, the Karakalpak language, or demands for justice. Journalists and bloggers who worked through YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, and other platforms have received lengthy prison sentences. Karakalpak students and activists have reported punishment for sharing—or even merely “liking”—online comments that the authorities consider threatening.

Think about that. A young person can face punishment not for committing violence, not for organizing an armed movement, but for touching a button on a telephone. For sharing a video. For liking a comment. For asking why the Karakalpak language is disappearing from public signs in Karakalpakstan. The purpose is not merely to punish individuals. It is to convince an entire people that discussing their history, defending their language, or remembering the dead has become a crime. Karakalpakstan is also experiencing a broader and more gradual erosion of its identity. Our language has been pushed out of important areas of public life. Independent Karakalpak media cannot operate freely. Independent political movements representing Karakalpak interests have not been allowed to develop. Human rights organizations face severe restrictions, and independent groups encounter major obstacles to legal registration and operation.

There is also a demographic and political dimension. For years, Karakalpak communities have expressed concern about the settlement of ethnic Uzbeks in Karakalpakstan, while poverty, environmental devastation, unemployment, and lack of opportunity have compelled many Karakalpaks to leave their homeland in search of work. At the same time, many senior administrative, governmental, and security positions are held by ethnic Uzbek officials or by officials whose political authority comes from Tashkent rather than from meaningful accountability to the people of Karakalpakstan. As a result, decisions concerning Karakalpak land, natural resources, education, language, policing, and security are frequently made without genuine participation by the Karakalpak people. This is not simply migration. When economic conditions push an Indigenous population out, another population is encouraged or enabled to settle, and political authority becomes concentrated in officials answerable to the central government, the demographic and political character of the homeland is transformed. Our land remains Karakalpak. But increasingly, decisions about that land are made without Karakalpaks. Karakalpakstan is rich in natural gas, minerals, and other resources, yet its population continues to experience poverty, unemployment, severe health problems, and environmental devastation. The wealth is extracted. The consequences remain with our people.

Karakalpak women have also experienced grave violations of their reproductive and medical rights. Human Rights Watch documented credible reports of involuntary sterilization. When these patterns are considered together, the attack on constitutional sovereignty, demographic pressure, resource extraction, weakening of the Karakalpak language, violations against women, political imprisonment, surveillance, and deaths in custody, they reveal something larger than isolated abuses.

They reveal the systematic erosion of a people's ability to exist politically, culturally, and safely in their own homeland. Yet Uzbekistan is increasingly presented internationally as a reforming and reliable strategic partner.

The United States has legitimate interests in Central Asia: regional stability, counterterrorism, critical minerals, trade, energy, transportation corridors, and limiting the influence of Russia and China. Those interests are real. But a stable strategic partnership cannot be built on the silence of victims. A government cannot present itself as reform-minded while imprisoning peaceful lawyers, journalists, and human rights defenders. It cannot claim to respect the rule of law while treating discussion of a constitutional agreement as a crime.

Today, I respectfully ask Congress and the Administration to take the following steps.

First, publicly call for the immediate and unconditional release of Dauletmurat Tajimuratov and all Karakalpak political prisoners.

Second, urgently press Uzbekistan to permit independent international medical experts to examine Dauletmurat and to allow independent monitoring of his treatment and prison conditions.

Third, support an independent international investigation into Bloody July, including the use of lethal force, the true number and identities of those killed, allegations of torture and disappearance, and the chain of command responsible for the operation.

Fourth, demand transparent and independent investigations into the deaths of Karakalpak prisoners in custody, including Polat Shamshetov and Mustafa Tursynbayev.

Fifth, urge Uzbekistan to review and overturn convictions based solely on peaceful speech, journalism, social-media activity, sharing content, or “liking” online material.

Sixth, insist that expanded cooperation with Uzbekistan, including trade, investment, critical minerals, energy, and security assistance—be accompanied by specific, public, and measurable human rights benchmarks.

Seventh, encourage direct and sustained engagement with Karakalpak civil society, victims’ families, human rights defenders, former political prisoners, and diaspora representatives—not only with officials in Tashkent.

History will judge governments by the treaties they signed and the promises they broke.

It will judge democracies by the people they chose not to abandon.

Thank you.