

*Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing  
The Andijan Massacre Ten Years Later: The Human Rights Situation in Uzbekistan  
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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on the important issue of the legacy in Uzbekistan of the Andijon tragedy. My remarks reflect the 2015 S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2015 Annual Report's chapter on Uzbekistan.

### **Uzbekistan**

**Key Findings:** Particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Uzbekistan due to a highly restrictive religion law and severe limits on all independent religious activity. The government has jailed as many as 12,000 Muslims who do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or who it claims are extremist. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2015 that Uzbekistan be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the State Department has so designated Uzbekistan since 2006, most recently in July 2014, it has also since 2009 indefinitely waived taking any punitive action.

### **Background**

93 percent of Uzbekistan's population is Muslim, mostly Hannafi Sunni with about one percent Shia. Some four percent is Russian Orthodox. The other three percent includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, and some 6,000 Ashkenazi and 2,000 Bukharan Jews.

Uzbekistan's 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations severely limits the rights of all religious groups and eases Uzbek state control of religious activity, particularly of Muslims. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production and distribution of religious texts; bans minors from religious groups; and allows only clerics to wear religious clothing in public. Many religious groups cannot meet complex registration rules. A 2014 censorship decree banned texts that “distort” beliefs or encourage people to convert.

The Uzbek government represses individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to official religious practices or for alleged association with extremist political programs. Uzbekistan faces security threats from groups using violence in the name of religion, but vague anti-extremism laws are also used against those who pose no credible security threats. The harsh Uzbek campaign against independent Muslims continues. Particularly targeted are those linked to the 2005 Andijon protests, 231 are still jailed and 10 prisoners have died. The Uzbek government pressures countries to return Uzbeks who fled after Andijon. .

As USCIRF noted in its May 13 press release: “On May 13, 2005, as many as 1,000 people were killed when Uzbek soldiers fired indiscriminately and without warning into a crowd of demonstrators in the city of Andijon during a largely peaceful protest in support of 23 local businessmen on trial for alleged ties to Islamic extremism. USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett said: “The Andijon tragedy is a black mark which will remain until the Uzbek government allows a credible investigation of this tragic event and undertakes the necessary reforms to respect religious freedom and human rights,” said USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. “While Uzbekistan faces legitimate security concerns, these concerns cannot be used as excuses to violate the religious freedom and human rights of its citizens.”

### **Religious Freedom Conditions 2014-2015**

***Application of Extremism Laws:*** The Uzbek state continues its decade-long policy of arresting and imprisoning, some for 20-years, those who reject state control of religion or for suspected affiliations. Many are denied due process and tortured; some are held in psychiatric hospitals. Up to 12,000 Uzbek Muslims are estimated to be jailed on such charges. Often without evidence of using or advocating violence, the Uzbek state claims that many detainees belong to “Wahhabi” or “jihadist” groups: which include political opponents, violent extremists, those who have foreign education, or non-violent independent Muslims.

Last year, several Muslims got five-year terms after police found on their cell phones Qur’anic verses and allegedly “extremist” sermons. In February 2015, the Uzbek government amnestied six Muslim prisoners; all of them had to ask for presidential pardon, including Hairulla Hamidov, sports journalist and Muslim commentator. The other five were jailed because they had studied the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

***Detention Conditions:*** Torture is endemic in Uzbek prisons and includes rape and blocking victims’ air supply. Torture allegedly is used to force adults and children to renounce religious beliefs or to make confessions.. Nilufar Rahimjanova, 37, died in detention in 2014. Three years into a ten-year prison term, she reportedly was jailed to punish her Iran-based husband and her Tajikistan-based father, both Muslim theologians.

***Restrictions on Muslims:*** The Uzbek government tightly controls Islamic institutions, prohibits their independent practice and has confiscated several mosques. The official Muslim Spiritual Board oversees the naming and training of imams, and censors the content of sermons and Islamic materials. Nevertheless, attendance at registered mosques is high.

***Charges against Non-Muslims:*** The government often brands evangelical Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremists” and they face fines, detention, and arrest. The state-controlled media encourages prejudice against minority religious groups.

***Restrictions on Religious Materials:*** The Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) censors religious materials. Believers reportedly destroy their own sacred texts due to fear of police confiscation. In 2013, an official said that Uzbek law only allows religious texts to be read inside buildings of registered religious groups. In 2014, a Baptist was detained after he put up posters with Bible verses. The government also has a long list of banned international human rights websites.

***Restrictions on Religious Instruction and Travel:*** Religious instruction is limited to officially-sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. In 2013, a woman was fined for her 12-year-old son's "illegal" religious education; he took art lessons from Protestants. In 2010 Muslim religion teacher Mehriniso Hamdamova got a seven-year term for private Islamic lessons for women. The government restricts international travel for religious purposes..

## **U.S. Policy**

Uzbekistan shares borders with the four other former Soviet Republics in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In recent years, U.S. policy in Uzbekistan has focused on the country's key position in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a supply route for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's NDN role will remain important in 2015 as the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces accelerates.

In 2004, Congress prohibited U.S. assistance to the Uzbek central government unless the Secretary of State reports that Uzbekistan is making substantial human rights progress. Some U.S. aid to Uzbekistan was withheld on those grounds. In 2008, Congress blocked Uzbek officials from entering the U.S. if they are responsible for the 2005 Andijon violence or other human rights violations.

In July 2005, Uzbekistan evicted the U.S. from the Khanabad military base, a hub for combat and humanitarian missions to Afghanistan since shortly after 9/11. But four years later, Uzbekistan reportedly allows "case-by-case" U.S. counter-terrorism operations on its territory. In 2010, Congress permitted expanded military education and border guards training programs for Uzbekistan. Two years later, the State Department certified on national security grounds that military aid to Uzbekistan should resume for six months, despite its negative human rights assessment. In a VOA interview, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State (DAS) for South and Central Asia Affairs Dan Rosenblum said that as of late 2014 Uzbekistan had received excess U.S. military mine-resistant and armored vehicles to support the country's counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts.

The United States instituted Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with each Central Asian state in 2009. The most recent U.S.-Uzbekistan ABC was in December 2014. DAS Rosenblum told the VOA that ABC human rights issues included prison conditions, treatment of prisoners,

restrictions on civil society and media, labor rights, and religious freedom. He also told USCIRF staff that the U.S. delegation called for release of specific religious and political prisoners. Since 2006, the State Department has designated Uzbekistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for its systematic, egregious, ongoing violations of religious freedom, most recently in July 2014. The State Department continued to indefinitely waive any action due to CPC designation, because it is in the “important national interest of the United States.”

## **Recommendations**

The U.S. government should continue to designate Uzbekistan a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government on steps to be removed from the CPC list; if that fails, lift the CPC-linked waiver in place since January 2009, and impose sanctions;
- Consider making U.S. assistance, except humanitarian and human rights programs, contingent on the Uzbek government’s undertaking actions to comply with international human rights standards, including reforming the 1998 religion law and permitting an international investigation into the 2005 Andijon events;
- Press for UN Human Rights Council scrutiny of human rights in Uzbekistan and urge the Uzbek government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Independence of the Judiciary, and Torture;
- Ensure that U.S. statements and actions reflect U.S. concerns about human rights in its public statements and private interactions with the Uzbek government and ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains contacts with human rights activists;
- Encourage the Board for Broadcasting Governors to ensure continued U.S. funding for the VOA Uzbek Service and for RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service website, Muslims and Democracy and consider translating this RFE/RL Uzbek Service material into other relevant languages;