

UZBEKISTAN

REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

Head of state:

Islam Karimov

Head of government:

Shavkat Mirziyoyev

Freedom of expression was curtailed as human rights defenders and journalists continued to be harassed, beaten, prosecuted and detained. Two human rights defenders were released early from prison on humanitarian grounds, but at least 10 others remained in prison, some in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions. Concerns remained over the frequent use of torture and other ill-treatment to extract confessions, in particular from those suspected of links with banned religious groups.

Freedom of expression

Human rights defenders and journalists continued to face harassment and pressure from the authorities.

They were routinely monitored by uniformed and plain-clothes security officers, summoned for questioning, placed under house arrest or prevented from taking part in peaceful demonstrations or from meeting with foreign diplomats. Several reported being beaten by law enforcement officers or by people suspected of working for the security services to prevent them from publicizing human rights violations or criticizing the authorities.

■ Prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders, Alisher Karamatov and Khabibulla Akpulatov, were freed in April and July after serving prison sentences of almost six and seven years respectively, on charges of “libel” and “extortion” after unfair trials in 2005 and 2006.

■ In May, the head of the Kashkadaria branch of the independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, Gulshan Karaeva, was attacked by two women in a shop in the town of Karshi and her home was sprayed with graffiti, after she publicized her refusal of an offer by the National Security Service (SNB) to act as an informant. On 27 September, she was detained at the local police station where she was told she faced charges of “slander” and “insult”, from the two women who had attacked her in May. The charges carried a sentence of up to four years’ imprisonment. However, on 13 December she received a presidential amnesty

and criminal proceedings were stopped. Family members and colleagues of Gulshan Karaeva also faced harassment, insults and physical assaults. In July, her brother and sister-in-law were assaulted by two neighbours, who beat them and their nine-year-old daughter. The neighbours said that they were related to enemies of the people (referring to Gulshan Karaeva and her older brother Tulkin Karaev, a political refugee in Sweden). In August, Gulshan Karaeva’s brother and sister-in-law were summoned to their local police station and threatened with criminal charges in relation to the assault.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners by security forces and prison personnel continued to be routine. Scores of reports of torture and other ill-treatment emerged during the year, especially from men and women suspected or convicted of belonging to Islamic movements and Islamist groups and parties or other religious groups, banned in Uzbekistan. As in previous years, the authorities failed to conduct prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations into such reports and into complaints lodged with the Prosecutor General’s Office.

■ In February, 12 Turkish businessmen were released from prison following a presidential amnesty in December 2011, and deported to Turkey. They were sentenced in 2011, with 42 other Turkish businessmen, to two to three years’ imprisonment for various economic crimes including tax evasion. A documentary broadcast on state television showed some of the convicted businessmen allegedly confessing to committing economic crimes. It also claimed that the men had links to the banned “Nurchilar” Islamic movement. One of the men, Vahit Güneş, former general manager of the Turkuaz shopping centre in Tashkent, began legal action against the Uzbekistani authorities upon his return to Turkey. He alleged that he and others were tortured in SNB custody in order to force them to sign false confessions and that they had not been able to choose their own lawyers. He also alleged other detainees had been tortured in pre-trial detention, and that some had died as a result. Vahit Güneş received medical treatment for his injuries on his return to Turkey. He said another businessman, Hairetdin Öner, was still in hospital being treated for physical and psychological trauma two months after his release from prison.

■ In August, Jehovah's Witness Gulchehra Abdullaeva reported that she had been tortured at a police station in the town of Hazorasp, to make her confess to smuggling banned religious literature into Uzbekistan, a charge she denied. Police officers arbitrarily detained her in July after she returned from a trip to Kazakhstan. She said that they forced her to stand for hours without food or water, placed a gas mask over her head and cut off the air supply to suffocate her. She was made to sign a statement admitting to participating in proscribed religious activities and was then released. On 28 July she was convicted by the Hazorasp District Court of "teaching religious beliefs privately", and fined. Gulchehra Abdullaeva appealed against her sentence and lodged official complaints with the authorities but officials refused to respond or address her complaints.

Counter-terror and security

The authorities continued to seek the extradition of suspected members of Islamic movements and Islamist groups and parties banned in Uzbekistan in the name of security and the fight against terrorism. They also requested the extradition of political opponents, government critics and wealthy individuals out of favour with the regime. Many of these extradition requests were based on fabricated or unreliable evidence. The government offered diplomatic assurances to sending states to secure the returns, pledging free access to detention centres for independent monitors and diplomats. In practice, they did not honour these guarantees. Those forcibly returned to Uzbekistan faced incommunicado detention, torture and other ill-treatment and, after unfair trials, long prison sentences in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions. The authorities were also accused of attempting assassinations of political opponents living abroad.

■ On 22 February, imam Obidkhon Nazarov, a refugee in Sweden since 2006, was shot in the head outside his home by an unidentified gunman. He remained in a coma. He was a popular dissident imam who had often publicly criticized the Uzbekistani authorities for their repression of independent Muslim groups. He had fled Uzbekistan in 2000, but in 2005 he was accused of being an organizer of the Andizhan protests and ensuing violence. The authorities had sought his extradition ever since and denounced him as a security threat to Uzbekistan. In the trial following his assassination attempt, the judge noted that he was

most likely targeted for his political beliefs by a group from outside Sweden. The state prosecutor accused the authorities in Uzbekistan of having organized the assassination attempt. The lawyer representing Obidkhon Nazarov's family and many of his supporters blamed the Uzbekistani security services.

■ Ruslan Suleymanov was extradited from Ukraine to Uzbekistan on 20 September. He had moved to Ukraine in November 2010, fearing that he would be subjected to an unfair trial and to possible torture and other ill-treatment. He had been a manager in a private construction company in Uzbekistan which was targeted for takeover by business rivals in 2008. When the company refused to submit, it was raided by security services and company managers, including Ruslan Suleymanov, were investigated for economic crimes. He was detained in Ukraine in February 2011 following an extradition request from Uzbekistan. Although the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, had recognized him as a refugee under its mandate in May and was seeking his resettlement, he was nevertheless extradited from Ukraine on 20 September, and in November his family reported that he was being held in pre-trial detention in Tashkent.

VENEZUELA

BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA

Head of state and government:

Hugo Chávez Frías

Levels of violent crime, especially gun-related crime, remained high despite efforts to control the availability and use of firearms. Violence in prisons remained widespread and riots continued. The government initiated its withdrawal from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Background

Venezuela's human rights record was assessed under the UN Universal Periodic Review, whose report was adopted in March. Venezuela had accepted several of the recommendations made, including those on human rights defenders. It made a commitment to support their activities and to publicly recognize their