UZBEKISTAN'S LITANY OF VIOLATIONS

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
OF NEW JERSEY
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Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, as Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, I rise today to highlight the plight of all those in Uzbekistan who are prisoners of conscience either for their religious or political activities. Defendants have been convicted of criminal offenses based on forced confessions and planted evidence. The regime has also refused to register independent human rights monitoring organizations (the Human Rights Society and the Independent Human Rights Society), while groups which cooperate closely with the government (Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Individual) have been registered without delay. On June 25, Uzbek police savagely beat Mikhail Ardzinov, one of the country's most prominent human rights activists.

A key component of Uzbekistan's assault on human rights has been a thoroughgoing campaign against religious believers. Since 1997, hundreds of independent Muslim activists and believers associated with them have been arrested. In February of this year, bombs exploded in the capital, Tashkent, which killed sixteen bystanders and damaged government buildings, narrowly missing President Karimov and government officials. Karimov accused Muslim activists of having carried out a terrorist attack intended to assassinate him. The harassment and detention of Muslim activists has greatly intensified since then and an ongoing series of show trials had discredited them as dangerous religious extremists. Last month, six people were sentenced to death and another 16 received prison terms ranging from eight to 20 years in a trial that by no means met Western standards for due process. Since then, two arrested Muslims have died in prison, and another five have been sentenced to death and require a new trial. The penalties can range anywhere from long prison sentences, massive fines, and confiscation of property, to denial of official registration rights. On May 12 of this year, Uzbekistan tightened its Criminal Code, making participation in an unregistered religious group a criminal offense, punishable by a fine equivalent to fifty times the minimum monthly wage or imprisonment of up to three years.

Mr. Speaker, these actions indicate that the policies of the Government of Uzbekistan toward religious groups are not moving in the right direction.

In fact, these initiatives are in direct violation to Uzbekistan's OSCE commitments, including Article 16.3 of the Vienna Concluding Document which states that "the State will grant upon their request to communities of believers, practicing or preparing to practice their religious acts, freedom of worship, and will ensure adequate security for their persons and for the buildings, funds, and other property indispensable for the exercise of their religion." Both the Vienna and Helsinki Documents stress the importance of religious liberty and the right to engage in religious activity.