

Monday 9 June 2008

## UZBEKISTAN

### UZBEKISTAN'S FARFICAL MEDIA FREEDOM CONFERENCE

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The "International seminar on freedom of media in a modern democratic society" in Tashkent on 9-10 June 2008, is a sad farce and an empty shadow of the European Union's original intention to hold a meaningful meeting.

Though it was earlier intended as an EU-Uzbekistan civil society dialogue seminar on media freedom, the conference now has a final agenda and list of participants guaranteeing a propaganda show for the Uzbek government. Those with critical voices, who would have highlighted the regime's appalling record on media freedom and other human rights abuses, have been locked out of the discussion.

The Commission has stated its intention to hold the original civil society seminar at some future point, and we the undersigned -- all of us originally invited by the EU to take part -- sincerely hope that happens. Unfortunately, Tashkent's deceptive ploy to imply EU approval of what is now a farfical event has deeply undermined the chances of any serious meeting happening in future.

Uzbekistan's "media freedom" conference on 9-10 June will almost certainly not cover any of the main issues on this topic. It is doubtful there will be much discussion of the widespread restrictions on freedom of expression in that country. Few will talk about the journalists jailed for exercising their professional duties, some on spurious charges of insulting the president or the state, while others on equally spurious charges of financial crimes.

Harassment of journalists continues in Uzbekistan. Restrictive laws allow the authorities to persecute any journalist whose critical information is considered by the government as hostile to Uzbekistan, including amendments to the Criminal Code adopted on 17 February 2004 -- which effectively criminalise the sharing of information critical of human rights in the country. Many independent journalists who have not been imprisoned or otherwise silenced have had to flee into exile, including Galima Bukharbaeva, who has been unable to safely return to the country since her first-hand reporting of the Andijan massacre in 2005, and Natalya Bushuyeva who was forced to leave in 2007.

The government has refused to re-accredit a large number of international media outlets, including Deutsche Welle, BBC, RFE/RL, and IWPR. In terms of domestic media, the picture is one of pervasive government control of media outlets and a crackdown on

independent voices in the country. The appointment of local information agencies' editors-in-chief remains opaque and subject to the control of the presidential administration. Only those journalists enjoying the National Security Service's approval are able to work in leading positions in mass media outlets. This is especially true in case of TV and radio broadcasters.

The government continues to block access of ordinary internet users to websites or to specific content on web-sites that contain critical information about Uzbekistan. Censorship continues to be practised in a disguised manner even after the official shutting down of the UzLIT entity established for controlling print mass media activities and their content in 2003. Though the official organ of pre-publication censorship may be gone, self-censorship has proven just as effective given its stiff reinforcement through fear of harsh reprisals by the security services. Every Uzbek journalist knows what the regime's red lines are on content and adjusts his or her output accordingly.

**Regardless of what is said at the 9-10 June "media freedom" conference in Tashkent, for us, it is clear the government should take the following concrete steps immediately:**

- In line with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guaranteeing freedom of expression:
  - End all forms of censorship, including repealing the 2004 amendments to the criminal code;
  - Cease harassment and intimidation of independent journalists working in the country;
  - Lift reporting restrictions on all domestic and international media outlets;
  - Release journalists wrongfully detained for their professional activities and others detained for exercising their freedom of expression (listed in appendix 1);
  - Allow international media outlets, including those that have been forced to stop working in Uzbekistan, to register their bureaus and grant accreditation to international journalists;
  - Allow Uzbek journalists who have had to flee the country due to harassment and threats to return to Uzbekistan and guarantee their safety;
- In line with Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 14 of the binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guaranteeing public trials, make all criminal trials open by allowing Uzbek and foreign journalists and other independent monitors to cover proceedings from inside the courtrooms;
- Allow the independent appointment and dismissal of media chiefs, free from the control of the Presidential apparatus and National Security Service;
- Issue an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Media Freedom.

Freedom of expression being a core principle enshrined in a number of international human rights treaties to which Uzbekistan is a party, and free and independent media being essential to an accountable government and the social harmony, peaceful development and long-term stability of every country, we the undersigned call on the Uzbek authorities to take these steps immediately.

Human Rights Watch

International Crisis Group

Open Society Institute

Reporters sans frontières

## **Appendix 1: Non-exhaustive list of individuals currently imprisoned in Uzbekistan for exercising their right to freedom of expression**

We would like to recall that a number of journalists and human rights defenders remain imprisoned, notably Jamshid Karimov, a correspondent with IWPR, is still subject to forced 'treatment' in a psychiatric clinic.

We call for the release of the following journalists, human rights defenders and others jailed for exercising their freedom of expression:

1. Muhammad Bekjanov
2. Yusuf Juma
3. Jamshid Karimov
4. Mamadali Makhmudov
5. Gayrat Mehliboyev
6. Ortikali Namazov
7. Yusuf Ruzimuradov

### **Other human rights defenders also behind bars for their human rights work:**

1. Azam Formonov
2. Abdusattor Irzaev
3. Nosim Isakov
4. Alisher Karamatov
5. Norboi Kholjigitov
6. Rasul Khudainasarov
7. Dilmurod Muhitdinov
8. Mamarajab Nazarov
9. Habibulla Okpulatov
10. Yuldash Rasulov