



**Submission from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee
Universal Periodic Review of Uzbekistan
October 2012**

In its submission for the Universal Periodic Review in December 2008, Uzbekistan outlined its human rights policy as being based on eight basic principles. Among these were a commitment to universally recognized human rights ideas and values and to its international human rights obligations, rule of law and a strong civil society as well as openness and transparency.¹

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee considers that Uzbekistan has failed to live up to these principles in the period since its previous Universal Periodic Review.

Over the past few years, Uzbekistan has become an increasingly important strategic partner for the United States and others engaged in Afghanistan, especially with a view to a future withdrawal of troops from the country, which shares a border with Uzbekistan. While the international community has been critical of Uzbekistan's human rights record in the time since the Andijan massacre in May 2005, the tone has grown milder in recent months. At the same time, no significant improvement in Uzbekistan's human rights record has been noted by any national or international human rights organization.

The use of torture remains widespread in Uzbekistan. Among the methods used during interrogations are beatings, electric shocks and simulated asphyxiation. In 2011, a video interview with alleged former security service agent Aleksandr Rakhmanov was published, where he describes using plastic bags over prisoners' heads to suffocate them, forcing them to inhale poisonous smoke from burning rubber, continued and repeated beatings, rapes and sleep deprivation. These descriptions coincide with the testimonies of numerous victims of torture from Uzbekistan who have survived to tell their stories.

While Uzbekistani journalists practice self-censorship for fear of retribution, restrictive laws and practice also means that anyone raising critical questions in the media risk persecution and imprisonment. The official media is completely state-controlled, but some journalists publish materials on the internet, often under pseudonyms. The local organization Prisoners of Conscience has documented numerous such cases, where journalists have been imprisoned for raising issues of corruption, human rights violations or materials critical of the country's leadership. The same is true of human rights defenders, such as Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Azam Formonov, Nosim Isakov, Gaibullo Jalilov, Alisher Karamatov, Jamshid Karimov, Norboi Kholjigitov, Rasul Khudainasarov, Ganihon Mamatkhanov, Habibulla Okpulatov, Yuldash Rasulov, Dilmurod Saidov, and Akzam Turgunov, all of whom are serving long prison sentences for carrying out their highly important work.

Over the past four years, Uzbekistan has continued the practice of suppressing and persecuting members of religious communities considered to be "non-traditional". These include Muslims as well as religious minorities such as Christians, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews and Hare Krishna. Persecution takes place through house searches, detention, imprisonment and torture, as well as

¹ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/156/03/PDF/G0815603.pdf?OpenElement>

through bureaucratic means. Uzbekistan has the worst record of violating the right to freedom of religion or belief among all former Soviet Union republics.

On the political level, Uzbekistan is controlled by President Islom Karimov and his circle, which also includes close family members. No election has ever been free or transparent in Uzbekistan, and engaging in politics on an independent platform is impossible in practice.

Among the many other areas of serious concern in Uzbekistan are the rights of children. Every year, hundreds of children in Uzbekistan are taken out of schools and into forced labor in cotton fields.

If the international community is to have access to verified information on human rights issues on the ground international organizations should be permitted to work freely inside the country, gathering information and checking facts. As of today, no international human rights organization is operating in Uzbekistan. The office of Human Rights Watch was closed in March 2011, having faced serious obstacles to carrying out any work in the country for years prior to this.

Similarly, numerous employees of foreign human rights organizations as well as independent journalists have been denied visas or have been deported from Uzbekistan upon arrival over the past four years. Many do not wish to have their names published, as they are concerned that visa bans or deportations from Uzbekistan may cause problems upon entry to other CIS member states.

Likewise, civil society in Uzbekistan has grown increasingly smaller over the years, as one activist after another is forced to flee the country and seek asylum abroad or is arrested and imprisoned under long and severe sentences.

We consider that Uzbekistan has been and continues to take active measures to keep independent human rights researchers from collecting information on violations inside the country. As such, what limited information is available on the current situation must be considered to be merely the top of the iceberg.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee remains deeply concerned about the current human rights situation in Uzbekistan, which begs improvement on nearly every aspect of fundamental human rights.