

Escalating Violence and Rights Violations in Central Asia



March 28, 2002

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 55 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys more than 20 missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

ESCALATING VIOLENCE AND RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

MARCH 28, 2002

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
WASHINGTON, DC

The briefing was held at 2:15 p.m. in Room 2220, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC, The Honorable Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.

Panelists present: Vitaly Ponomarev, Director, Central Asia Program, Memorial Human Rights Center; Atanar Arifov, General Secretary, Uzbekistan's Erk Party and former political prisoner; Abdusalom Ergashev, Head, Ferghana Branch Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan; and Pulat Akhunov, Director Central Asian Association of Sweden.

Mr. SMITH. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this briefing, which is the latest in a series of events that the Helsinki Commission has held on Central Asia, focusing on human rights and democratization.

Just for the record, the Helsinki Commission, as I think many of you know, was formed right after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act back in 1975. We were formed in 1976 by an act of Congress. It's a bipartisan, bicameral Commission, with members of the executive branch serving as Commissioners as well.

It has been my distinct privilege to serve on the Helsinki Commission for the last 22 years, and I've been Chairman and Co-Chairman since about 1994, and I'm currently serving as Co-Chairman with Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell from Colorado.

Since 1999, our Commission has held a series of hearings on Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. Later this year, we will round out the series of hearings with a hearing on Tajikistan.

With the terrorist attacks in September and America's military campaign in Afghanistan, Central Asia, long seen as a repressive, resource-rich backwater, has taken center stage. U.S. relations with all of the region's countries have gotten much closer. A few weeks ago, Uzbekistan's President Karimov came to Washington to meet with President Bush. The two countries have signed a declaration on strategic partnership and cooperation.

President Karimov's visit focused attention on U.S. policy and how the intensified American engagement in the region affects the prospect for democratic change in Central Asia. I participated in President Karimov's meeting with House Speaker Dennis Hastert and presented him with two Congressional letters outlining human rights concerns and specifically pressing him on cases of individuals who are credibly reported to have been tortured in prison.

A bipartisan group of Helsinki Commissioners also has written to President Bush opposing the granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations to a diverse group of former

Soviet republics. The letter specifically requests that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the two most repressive states, not receive PNTR, based on a pattern of clear, gross and uncorrected violations of OSCE human rights commitments in the region.

Bush administration officials deny that the U.S. human rights agenda has taken a back seat to military and anti-terrorism cooperation. They claim that working together allows us to raise more issues, more often and with greater chance of success. As evidence, they point to incremental victories; for example, Uzbekistan has finally registered an independent human rights organization and recently sentenced to long-term jail terms several policemen who had tortured detainees.

Still, there is little sign of any willingness on the part of Central Asian leaders to make fundamental systemic changes, and there are indications, on the other hand, of growing ferment in some countries. Last week, for example, violence broke out in Kyrgyzstan, where soldiers fired on demonstrators protesting the continued incarceration of parliamentarian Azimbek Beknazarov. Five people were killed, scores injured, and all sides are now reassessing the state of relations between the state and society.

Yesterday, a political activist in the political movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan was arrested, continuing the pattern of harassment of political opposition. Mr. Akezhan Kazhegeldin, members might recall, testified before our Commission in May of 1999, and he is among those who is repressed.

Even in Turkmenistan, several former high-level officials have recently joined the opposition.

Our Commission has conducted the most comprehensive monitoring of the situation in these countries since they gained their independence 10 years ago, and I would encourage all of you, especially those who might be viewing on C-SPAN, to go to our web site, www.csce.gov, and look at the documentation and the information contained on that web site. It is very accurate, it is timely and it is full of, I think, very important information.

We are very pleased to be able to take advantage of the presence in Washington of some expert witnesses, hosted by the International League for Human Rights, to organize a briefing on human rights and democratization in Central Asia. Our guests are all long-time human rights activists and monitors. Some of them have paid the price, a big price, for maintaining their convictions by serving time in prison.

To introduce our very distinguished guests is Michael Ochs, who is our senior staff advisor, an expert on this region of the world; who has been there many, many times.

Michael, if you wouldn't mind doing the introductions.

Mr. Ochs. Thank you, Mr. Smith..

I would like to introduce our guests. They are Vitaly Pononaryov, who is the director of the Central Asia Program of the Memorial Human Rights Center; Atanzar Arifov, the general secretary of the Erk Party in Uzbekistan; Pulat Akhunov, director of the Central Asian Association of Sweden; and Abdusalom Ergashev, head of the Ferghana branch of the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan, the organization that was just recently registered by the Government of Uzbekistan.

Mr. Pononaryov [through translator]. The organization that I represent, Memorial Human Rights Center, is continuously concerned with the situation in Uzbekistan. Practically in all of the Central Asian countries where we have worked, we have observed a serious decline in the situation with human rights in these countries, as well as general

destabilization of the political situation.

We receive news of concern practically on a daily basis, including, for example, yesterday, when we received news of the arrest of one of the leaders of the democratic movement in Kazakhstan, Mukhtar Ablyazov, as well as the arrest of a Former Member of Parliament in Kyrgyzstan, Azimbek Beknazarov, as well as news of new trials against political opposition in Uzbekistan, and a crackdown in Turkmenistan.

I would like to touch upon particularly the situation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Not only is all political opposition banned in Turkmenistan, but even human rights organizations are denied registration. All religious confessions are banned except for the official brand of Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. Scores of mosques have recently been closed.

Virtually no free press exists in Turkmenistan, while the president of Turkmenistan is the founder of all media outlets in the country. Recently we have received information about detentions and arrests of several officials in Turkmenistan. No accusations have been brought against them yet.

Now a few words about Uzbekistan. In my opinion, there has been no significant progress in human rights after September 11 and Uzbekistan's participation in the alliance with the United States in the war on terror. While some political prisoners have recently been released after confessing to their guilt and asking for pardon from the president, several trials are taking place in Uzbekistan.

Just today, at our meeting with State Department officials, we gave them a 500-page list of political prisoners in Uzbekistan which constitutes only 1/3 of the total number. The scale of repression in Uzbekistan resembles that during Stalin times and the number of its political prisoners is larger than the number of political prisoners in all of the former Soviet republics.

The majority of human rights organizations are still denied official registration, which makes their work less effective.

While the recently held trial (and the subsequent conviction) of four law enforcement agents who tortured an alleged Islamic terrorist in detention, was covered widely in the Western press, it received almost no coverage internally.

Political opposition parties are still targets of state-sponsored persecution while human rights defenders have not been able to enjoy freedom of assembly, deprived of a place to meet.

While the Uzbek constitution expressly bans any form of censorship, the state condones—de facto—the institution of censorship by allocating a certain portion of its annual budget to maintain censors.

I hope that my colleagues working in Uzbekistan will follow up on what I have just said, but let me just conclude by saying that these supposed improvements in the area of human rights recently hailed in the West are only token gestures designed to appease the West, having failed to change the situation fundamentally.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

Mr. Arifov?

Mr. Arifov [through translator]. Let me just comment on some of these changes that have taken place in Uzbekistan after its entry in the antiterrorist coalition after September 11.

While there are some positive improvements, certain trends have been quite negative, and I believe those negative developments overshadowed any positive developments.

Let me cite two examples.

Before the events of September 11, we expected the release of several political prisoners; however, the plans to release them were scrapped. I would also characterize, as a very negative development, the recently held presidential referendum in Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, the use of torture is still widespread as a means to extract confession as well as a means of punishment in places of pre-trial detention.

Persecution of political party members as well as human rights activists continues. As an example, let me inform you that just yesterday we received news that Yevgeny Rakanov, who is the editor of Zona.UZ web site, has been attacked and arrests were made against it. As well as these individuals, Kuliyeu and Shamulzayev, who are members of the recently founded Muslim Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile the authorities are continuing to deny registration and legalization of the unlawfully banned political movements, political parties Erk and Birlik, which makes us conclude that the attitude of our government toward political opposition has not improved significantly.

I will be happy to answer your questions.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much for that. What we will do is we will hear from the remaining two expert witnesses, and then go to some questions. If you do have a question, I would ask you to come to the microphone, and as briefly as possible pose that question.

Mr. AKHUNOV?

INTERPETER. Mr. Akhunov would like to add that besides his human rights activity, he is the deputy chairman of Birlik Party.

Mr. AKHUNOV [through translator]. I would like to say how impressed I am with the knowledge that Congressman Smith has about the situation in Uzbekistan, and refer to this Congressional letter addressed to President Karimov which expresses a serious concern that his promises of any improvement in human rights and democracy will ring hollow.

Yes, certain improvements have taken place, including, for example, registration of an independent human rights organization, as well as an amnesty of about 900 political prisoners. But if you look closely at this list of prisoners who have been released, their date of release was before September 11; it was set sometime in August, before any serious discussion of a new strategic relationship with the United States.

Now consider the fact of the registration of this organization.

We believe it might be yet another attempt by the government to cause further rifts in the human rights community in my country, because this organization is known to have been engaged in serious conflicts with other human rights organizations.

After the visit of President Karimov to the United States, we, as representatives of Uzbekistan's human rights movement, both those still in the country and those in exile, and outside Uzbekistan, are yet to see any clear signal from our government, from the Uzbek Government, that it is ready to implement democratic reforms.

At our meeting with State Department officials, they told us about their positive reaction to the release of the poet Yusuf Dzhumaev and the end of his persecution. Just yesterday we received news that another round of oppression against him began. He had to flee his town to the capital, to Tashkent, while we also have information that a new criminal case against him might have been opened.

I believe that the absence of political, economic and social reforms in Uzbekistan will eventually lead to complete destabilization in my country. Although the government claims

that the country is generally stable, I will cite you a few examples that paint a different picture.

The steps of political oppression that the Uzbek Government has taken recently, including the persecution of political opposition as well as the use of torture in detention facilities, have led to demonstrations of protest in all parts of Uzbekistan.

I believe that the stagnation in economic reforms in Uzbekistan, which has maintained an outdated Soviet-era model of economy, has led to destabilization as well.

Just last year, farmers in the Qarshi region, after collecting their harvest, were supposed to give half of it to the state. The government, however, sent troops to confiscate the harvest in its entirety, which made these farmers unite and come out on the street and demonstrate in front of local administrations, only then leading to the return of the confiscated crops. I believe that if such policies continue, the protests will grow in number and strength.

For lack of time I will turn it over to my colleagues, but will be happy to answer your questions, later.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much for your good strong work on behalf of human rights and for being here and for giving us the benefit of your wisdom.

I do want to ask that our final speaker, Mr. Ergashev, the head of the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan, the Ferghana Branch, would now make a presentation.

Mr. ERGASHEV [through translator]. I represent Uzbekistan's most populated area, the Ferghana Valley, the region where, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Soviet states, massive human rights violations have been committed. The repressive policies of the Uzbek Government against a peaceful Muslim organization, Adolyat, which operated in the city of Namangan, eventually led to the creation of an infamous Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Despite the new relationship that Uzbekistan has been enjoying with the United States, the situation with the rights of Muslims remains difficult. For example, trials of alleged Islamic terrorists continue in Namangan district court. These trials of alleged Islamic terrorists handed down sentences ranging from 7 to 20 years in prison on trumped-up charges of terrorism. The authorities have also been conducting a policy of oppression against a peaceful Muslim organization, Hizb-ut-Tahri.

We have fears that the repression against Hizb-ut-Tahri will lead to yet another extremist terrorist organization. I believe that the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan is at a dead-end, since if you look on the map of the region, it is in close proximity to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both of which are in an uneasy relationship with Uzbekistan.

I believe that the regional poverty as well as high unemployment in this particular region of Uzbekistan can lead to serious disturbances and unrest, similar to the events that have recently taken place in the Jalalabad region of Kyrgyzstan.

I will be happy to take your questions.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

Let me just ask one opening question. When President Karimov was here, I and others did present him what I think was a very honest and almost stern appraisal of human rights in Uzbekistan, in our belief that there needs to be immediate and systemic changes to the repression. We pointed out that there are some 7,000 people incarcerated for their beliefs. Torture is absolutely pervasive in Uzbekistan. He referred, as did others on his

side, to a piece that was done somehow trying to soften their human rights appeal.

As a matter of fact he made it seem as if—"Here's our vindication"—the article was in the Weekly Standard, March 18, 2002. It was called, "Our Uzbek Friends: The Human Rights Rap Against Uzbekistan Is Naive."

It makes the point that the State Department, which has never been accused, as far as I know, of being too hard on human rights—the rap on the State Department usually is, if anything, they soften human rights abuses. I have been, as Chairman of the International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee for 6 years, and as Chairman of this Commission—and I read their reports very carefully. They very often softpedal human rights abuses in many countries around the world. Never have I ever seen them being on the too harsh side. Here we have this Mr. Schwartz, saying that the State Department and Western human rights organizations somehow are getting it wrong on Uzbekistan, by accusing Tashkent of human rights violations.

Now here before us today are indigenous leaders. You are from the inside, or part of the emigre community, speaking out boldly about these abuses.

What do you say to people like Mr. Schwartz who try to soft pedal and trivialize terrible repression in human rights, gross violations of human rights, especially when there are benefits to be had by the Uzbek Government with PNTR and other kinds of benefits if this is somehow put in the background? Would any of you like to respond to that?

Mr. AKHUNOV [through translator]. I believe that this is a dead wrong approach, not only in relation to Uzbekistan but also in relation to the United States.

I believe that if the Uzbek people do not see any visible, tangible improvements in human rights after President Karimov has returned to Uzbekistan after meeting with the U.S. officials here, they will link it to the official position of the United States, which they will see as encouraging the Uzbek president's continued policies of repression. This view could eventually lead to a serious anti-American protest.

I believe that ill wishers of the United States, people who do not support the United States and its policies, will use the words similar to those written by this journalist to stir further anti-American sentiment in the region. This has to do with the United States. I believe that we can expect even more severe circumstances in Uzbekistan.

As a former political prisoner, who, by the way, enjoyed the support of you, Mr. Smith, who wrote letters on my behalf which contributed to my release, I can tell you that several people are eager to take advantage of the words of this journalist to stir anti-American sentiment in Uzbekistan and discredit its policy in that country.

Thank you.

Mr. ARIFOV [through translator]. I believe that the president of Uzbekistan is unable to stop the practice of torture and the plague of corruption, as well as the phenomenon of false accusations without three very important factors.

First, there has to be a complete and immediate stop to repression and extremism on the state level.

The second factor would be to allow a multiparty system.

The Uzbek people must have a choice, must have alternatives, not only in the political area, but in other areas of their lives.

These three factors will lead to yet another very important one, and that is freedom of choice, which has to do with elections, since right now, citizens of Uzbekistan are not able to freely choose not only their central government, but their government on regional

and district levels.

Mr. PONONARYOV [through translator]. First, I would like to note that the state of economy of Uzbekistan is very poor. The Uzbek Government is interested in receiving Western investments and I believe that the promise of future financial assistance to Uzbekistan by the U.S. Government needs to be conditioned upon Uzbekistan's respect for human rights and democracy.

Of course, I believe it is not realistic to expect that Karimov will legalize political parties. However, it would be realistic for the West to insist on registering more human rights organizations, as well as calling for a roundtable with participation by governmental officials and civil society.

Today human rights organizations are extremely limited in their scope of activities, which mostly consists of monitoring of human rights situations and reporting human rights abuses to the West in hopes of putting pressure on the Uzbek Government.

Mr. SMITH. I appreciate that. I think the caution on not having conditionality on an economic relationship should not go unheeded.

We all know that the Europeans have been trading with Cuba for years and there has been absolutely no mitigation of their human rights abuses and their incarceration of political prisoners. We know that we have lifted PNTR for the People's Republic of China, and according to the State Department country reports and the leading human rights organizations, in every category of human rights observance there has been deterioration, not improvement, there has been significant deterioration.

So without linkage, we can only expect the dictatorships to get stronger and we then become—however unwittingly, we become enablers of dictatorships. We certainly do not want ever to see that happen.

Let me just ask what might be the ramifications of the violence in Kyrgyzstan. Would the authorities, in your view, loosen their grip, or would they crack down, and what spillover effect might this have on the other the Central Asian republics?

Mr. ARIFOV [through translator]. Let me respond briefly to that question. I believe that we can expect the tightening of our government's grip in the region as a whole.

I believe I am qualified to speak on this issue because I have the privilege of having worked with President Akayev back in the days of the Soviet parliament. I believe the events in Jalalabad are the direct reflection of Akayev's reluctance to step down and his continued efforts to cling to power. I believe that the Central Asian presidents understand very well how that—any kind of reform in their country will lead to a change of power in the region.

It is precisely their fear of losing power that has led to a situation like the one in Turkmenistan, where the president declared himself president for life, while the president of Uzbekistan was able to extend his term in office for at least another 10 years through the recently held referendum. We have a similar situation in Kyrgyzstan, whose president has repeatedly manipulated the constitution, installing himself as president indefinitely.

Mr. AKHUNOV [through translator]. I believe the crackdown in Jalalabad is a reflection of President Akayev's decision to join the anti-democratic chorus of Central Asian presidents, and the protests that ensued are a reflection of popular discontent with the increased repression.

Mr. ERGASHEV [through translator]. Usually, when the Uzbek Government feels that the anti-government uprisings, such as the one in Kyrgyzstan, have the potential to spill

over to their own country, they will obviously crack down further.

I believe that the intensified repression in the Ferghana Valley, meaning additional roadblocks and unauthorized searches of people's apartments, can lead to a similar unrest in Uzbekistan.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just ask you, because I think there is a pattern here that is very disturbing, and that is, on the one hand, many of us believe that we need to raise the specific cases of political and religious prisoners by name with their story. Yet, very often our official government response is, one, to see that as an impediment between United States and a Central Asian state or People's Republic of China or name the despotic country, and they just try to push those away.

I will give you an example. Li Shaomin, who was an American scholar, was being held in the People's Republic of China, and his family, his wife and child—and I met with them and raised their case repeatedly, as I did yours. When it was finally solved, Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to them and the others who were in that same category, the scholars, as “impediments”: “Now that we have the impediments behind us, we can go back to business as usual.” It seems to me that trivializes those who suffer torture and unspeakable cruelty by these dictatorships.

Now we have a situation where we are again getting very close to these dictators in Central Asia who elect themselves president for life, who use the pretext of fighting terrorism to crack down on dissidents and anyone who disagrees.

I know that Uzbekistan's criminal code provides for up to 20 years imprisonment merely for attending a meeting of a so-called illegal organization. Meeting here could be construed by some authority as a meeting of an illegal organization, so to speak, and we could get a sentence of up to 20 years, if they so characterized it. How arbitrary, capricious and extremely cruel.

Should we continue to emphasize individuals, and are there any that you think that we ought to be raising now? How strong has been our government—that is to say, the executive branch? You know the legislative branch has been very robust, I believe, in speaking out. Has the executive branch—the President, Secretary of State—likewise been robust?

Mr. ARIFOV [through translator]. I believe, of course, that first, it is important to press for fundamental changes, for improvements in human rights and democracy. However, when such are not attainable and are not realistic, we must continue pressing for certain individual cases.

For example, before the tragic events of September 11, five political prisoners were intended to be released by the Uzbek authorities under strong pressure by the U.S. Government, including a well-known writer, Mamadali Makhmudov, Murad Dzhuraev, and three brothers of Muhammad Solih, the exiled chairman of the Erk Party: Kamil Bekjanov, Rashid Bekjanov, Muhammad Bekjanov.

We wonder why plans to release these political prisoners stopped, and we appeal to you to keep up the pressure to release these individuals. These men, including a 62-year-old writer, are in jail on fabricated, trumped-up charges, while Mr. Solih's three brothers are in jail simply for their relation to the party's chairman.

Mr. SMITH. I just want to assure you that I raised personally with President Karimov cases and gave him a letter signed by many of my colleagues expressing deep concern for their well-being and for their release. My sense is that he was very well aware of those cases, though he gave it a cursory, “We will look into it.” But my comments back to him,

was that going forward, when we look at PNTR and when we look at any additional economic cooperation between the two countries, these cases and others like it will be paramount, central to whether or not that relationship goes forward.

Let me ask one other question of our distinguished human rights leaders. American audiences often gloss over what torture really means in a country in Central Asia or anywhere in the world. In a place like Uzbekistan, could you give us some insights exactly what it is that these thugs do to people once they are arrested?

Mr. ERGASHEV [through translator]. I brought here the statement written by Mamajan Shakirov, the gentleman who was sentenced on February 15. They accused him of being a member of the so-called Wahhabi terrorist group, a fact that he denied. According to this letter, in an effort to extract his confession, the investigators beat him severely, pulled his nails and teeth, as well as raped him.

Five trials of alleged terrorists have been taking place since February of this year in the Ferghana district court, with the presence of foreign including journalists, including American. At each of these trials, the defendants denied their membership in these organizations and testified that torture was used against them. Despite their testimony, however, each of them was convicted and sentenced to harsh prison terms.

Mr. Pononaryov [through translator]. We also receive information that besides beating suspects in detention, investigators rape them as well. Threats are made by investigators to rape the defendant's wife and children, including cases when the investigation was conducted with suspects stripped naked.

One important distinction must be made here. Torture is routinely used not only to extract confession, but also as means of punishment.

Mr. Pononaryov [through translator]. For example, members of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir political movement are expressly forbidden to hide the fact of their membership, and during arrest, they have to confess that they are members of this organization. This confession then gives enough ground for the law enforcement agents to detain them and then later for the court to convict them. Even then, with the guilty verdict assured, these individuals are beaten in detention.

Torture is also widely used against those inmates in places of detention and prisons, who participate in religious rites, such as prayer. If an inmate is caught attempting to pray on several occasions, it goes in his prison record, and he can then be transferred to a higher-security prison.

We also know of several instances when an inmate, a Muslim worshiper, after being brought to prison, after being convicted, was forced to symbolically convert to Christianity by making a cross gesture with his hand.

Mr. ARIFOV [through translator]. I know of the letter written by the mothers and relatives of five individuals who had been sentenced to death; it was sent to President Bush on the eve of President Karimov's visit. These letters were given to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent. You can also view these letters on the site of the Muslim Human Rights Society as well as the Birlik Party's site.

I read these individual's letters from prison, describing the torture used against them. I also read the letter written by Mamadali Makhmudov from prison, where he described in detail the torture used against him, and the humiliation he experienced.

This letter was also widely distributed and put on several web sites.

It is shocking to read this letter. He was hanged upside down. He was beaten. They burned his body with cigarette butts, threatened to rape his wife and his daughters, all the while trying to make him sign his own confession of having participated in the 1999

terrorist acts in Tashkent.

And we know that thousands of confessions have been extracted under torture, confessions implicating Muhammad Solih in terrorism. In addition, thousands of confessions that are extracted praising President Karimov and his policies.

Mr. ERGASHEV [through translator]. This deals with a case when a man was taken away supposedly for interrogation upon suspicion that he participated in an illegal organization. That was on November 4. For one month, his family was unable to learn of his whereabouts. Exactly one month later, on December 5, 2000, his body was found 75 kilometers from his place of residence.

A resident of the city of Marghilan was taken away and interrogated on August 25th. One month later, on September 30, policemen brought his body to his family, saying he died of heart failure, although his entire body was bruised and wounded.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just—yes?

Mr. Pononaryov [through translator]. I can mention many other forms of torture, including throwing a handcuffed detainee against a cement floor, and asphyxiation by putting on a gas mask. Electric shock is used in some cases.

Let me mention one particular instance of torture that took place in the city of Andizhan last year, when police used torture not against the suspect but rather his brother.

The policemen brought his brother, the brother of an alleged Islamic terrorist to the department and tortured him in order to learn of his brother's whereabouts. This person wrote a complaint to the prosecutor's office, as well as to the hospital, about the torture used against him, which led to more detentions and torture used against him. And this vicious cycle continued for several months.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. I do think that most Americans will be shocked to know that some allies that we have now embraced in our fight against al Qaeda and worldwide terror are at the same time torturers and perverts who not only permit but use as a means of extracting confessions horrific beatings coupled with rapes and threats of rapes against family members.

You know, one of the things that always strikes me when men from these governments visit—Uzbekistan's leader, when he came here and others—they come appear very reasonable, speaking in reasoned tones. Nothing seems to be shrill about their approach.

But when you peel away the veneer and the facade that has been erected, the ugliness of the use of torture and other repressive means in these countries like Uzbekistan just brings tears and great sorrow to all of us.

But if we act as if it doesn't exist, it seems to me, shame on us for being enablers. That very well could be the case, going forward.

I can assure you and I pledge to you, you who have spoken truth to power, especially dictatorships, that I, and I know I will not be alone, will speak out very forcibly about this terrible use of torture and the repression in each of these Central Asian republics.

We need zero tolerance for torture. It seems to me that it starts at the highest level, with President Bush. He, Colin Powell, Congress, our speaker and the majority leader on the Senate side have to speak with one voice: we will not stand idly by, even if you are partners with us in fighting terrorism, while you repress, rape and butcher your own people.

Human rights do matter. When I see statements like this in the *Weekly Standard*, "Our Uzbek Friends"—yes, we are friends with the people but not with the dictatorship—and that "The Human Rights Rap Against Uzbekistan Is Naive," I respectfully suggest

that this article and the sentiments behind it are naive in the extreme.

So, again, I want to thank you so much, unless any of you have any final comments. I know you have to be at Radio Liberty at 4 o'clock, which is a few moments away. But unless you would like to conclude with some comments, please.

INTERPRETER. Mr. Akhunov would like to make a concluding remark on behalf of the rest of the delegation, by appealing to the U.S. Government and policy-makers to not be naive when dealing with these former communist bosses who, for the past 10 years of their countries' independence have been conducting anti-democratic policies.

I urge you in dealing with this region to be guided by considerations of democracy and human rights and hold these presidents responsible for their promises of economic, political and democratic reforms.

Mr. ARIFOV [through translator]. I believe that by supporting opposition and human rights organizations, you will be strengthening civil society in general. I do not believe, however, that the Government of Uzbekistan will allow that to happen. Therefore we have to rely on external factors, such as moral, political and financial support to the opposition, to the democracy and human rights movement in our country.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much. I again deeply appreciate your presence, but more importantly the tremendous work you've done under extremely dire circumstances and having suffered as so many of you have for your beliefs and for your democracy, your human rights position.

The briefing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, the briefing was concluded at 4:00 p.m.]

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