

September 27, 2011

Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
US Department of State
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

We represent a broad, international coalition of human rights organizations, labor groups, trade unions, investors, and others, including independent civil society groups based in Uzbekistan, brought together by our common concern over recent actions by the US government to move toward “business as usual” with the Uzbek government, which remains one of the most repressive in the world.

Last week, an Appropriations Committee in the Senate approved a bill that will allow the provision of taxpayer-funded military and police assistance to the Uzbek government at a time when Uzbek authorities continue to silence civil society activists, independent journalists, and all political opposition; severely curtail freedom of expression and religion; and organize forced child labor on a massive scale.

The bill, if enacted, would allow the US government to waive the restrictions on aid, including military aid, to the Uzbek government, which have been in place since 2004 because of Uzbekistan’s deplorable human rights record.

We, the undersigned organizations, deplore the recent move to provide direct security assistance to one of the world’s most repressive governments. We call on you to stand behind your strong past statements regarding human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, including those made on the eve of your visit to Tashkent last December to meet with President Islam Karimov. We strongly urge you to oppose passage of the law and not to invoke this waiver. Furthermore, we call on you to publicly reiterate the serious concerns the US government has regarding Uzbekistan’s abysmal human rights record.

This Wednesday, September 28, Uzbekistan’s Foreign Minister Elyor Ganiyev is scheduled to attend a business forum of the American-Uzbek Chamber of Commerce in Washington, DC. Foreign Minister Ganiyev’s visit comes just weeks after the Department of State designated Uzbekistan as a “country of particular concern” given its egregious and continuing violations of religious freedom. The visit also coincides with the opening of the fall harvest in Uzbekistan, when authorities force up to two million children to pick cotton and continue to defy the

International Labor Organization's request to send monitors to the country to assess the problem.

More than a dozen human rights defenders and numerous journalists and political activists are languishing in prison in Uzbekistan because of their work. Torture and ill-treatment are systematic and widespread in pretrial detention and prisons, and the Uzbek government persistently refuses to allow domestic and international nongovernmental organizations to operate in the country.

Recent dramatic developments elsewhere in Central Asia and across the Middle East make clear that Uzbekistan's status as a strategic partner to the United States should not be allowed to eclipse concerns about its appalling human rights record.

As President Obama recognized in a speech on the "Arab Spring" earlier this year, "failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the United States pursues our own interests at their expense...Societies held together by fear and repression may offer the illusion of stability for a time, but they are built upon fault lines that will eventually tear asunder."

Even before the pro-democracy protests in the Middle East, popular revulsion about corruption and repression in Kyrgyzstan led to the overthrow in 2010 of a neighboring Central Asian government, with which the US military had established a close relationship and where the government had seemed, at the time, just as stable as that of Uzbekistan does today.

We note that President Karimov and other leaders of Uzbekistan, who benefit strategically from the presence of international forces in Afghanistan and financially from US payments related to Uzbekistan's role in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), have a stake in maintaining the NDN and the US-Uzbekistan relationship. Therefore, the US government need not—and should not—provide more concessions and rewards until the Uzbek government meaningfully addresses longstanding US concerns about its human rights record.

The firm positions you have championed in the past are by far the more effective course for the US government. Last December, at a town hall meeting with civil society groups in Astana, Kazakhstan, you stated that you would raise the plight of imprisoned human rights activists in your upcoming meeting with President Karimov. Once in Uzbekistan, you further affirmed the central role human rights played in the US-Uzbekistan relationship and underscored Uzbekistan's need to "translate words into practice" to improve its human rights record.

Following your statements in Astana, on December 1, 2010, Uzbek authorities released a single imprisoned human rights activist, Farkhad Mukhtarov, from prison, where he had been serving a four-year sentence on politically motivated charges. Mukhtarov's release, followed by the later release of Uzbek poet and dissident Yusuf Juma, demonstrates that sustained public pressure on human rights, coupled with diplomatic engagement, can yield positive results.

As the US government implements its policy towards Uzbekistan, it is important that you keep in mind that the Uzbek government is not the only audience. The Uzbek people are also watching closely.

There is still time to change course. We therefore urge you to take the opportunity of Minister Ganiyev's visit to make clear, both in private and in public, that US policies towards the Uzbek government will not fundamentally change absent meaningful human rights improvements, including the release of imprisoned pro-democracy activists, an end to harassment of civil society groups, effective steps to end torture, and the elimination of forced child labor in the cotton sector.

Sincerely,



AFL-CIO



The Child Labor Coalition



Amnesty International USA



CIVICUS



Anti-Slavery



European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights



Association for Human Rights in Central Asia



The Expert Working Group – Uzbekistan



Boston Common Asset Management, LLC



First Focus



Freedom House



CREA



Freedom Now



Human Rights Watch



Responsible Sourcing Network



International Crisis Group



Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights



International Labor Rights Forum



National Consumers League



Open Society Policy Center

SUMMARY of UZBEK GOVERNMENT POLITICAL and HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Complete Lack of Political Freedom. In the 20 years since Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union, there has not been a single election deemed even remotely “free and fair” by international monitoring bodies. According to Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World 2011* report, President Karimov uses “the dominant executive branch to repress all political opposition.” No opposition political parties are allowed to participate in the political process, and political opponents of President Karimov have either been forced to flee the country or are languishing in prison. At least thirteen human rights defenders, and numerous journalists and political activists are imprisoned for no reason other than their legitimate civil society activism, and a number of them have been subjected to torture. Uzbek authorities do not tolerate dissent of any kind; even tiny public demonstrations in Uzbekistan are ruthlessly suppressed.

Increasingly Closed Society. Since 2004, the government has expelled or forced the closure of numerous international organizations and media outlets, including Freedom House, Counterpart International, and the American Bar Association. It has also prevented most international news agencies from reporting in the country, forcing out Radio Free Europe/Radio

Liberty, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and many others. In March 2011, the government closed Human Rights Watch's Tashkent office, bringing to an end the 15-year-long presence of the last remaining international human rights monitoring organization in the country. The government also continues to deny access to UN Special Rapporteurs, eight of whom have sought country visits. There is only one active registered independent domestic human rights organization in the country, and those operating without registration are subject to constant harassment.

Torture Remains Systematic. As documented year after year by the U.S. State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, a number of UN monitoring bodies, and a range of international organizations, torture in Uzbekistan is widespread and systematic in all stages of the criminal justice system, and impunity for torture is the norm. Police and security agents use torture and ill-treatment to coerce detainees to implicate themselves or others, and confessions obtained under torture are often the sole basis for convictions. Judges routinely fail to investigate torture allegations that defendants make when they appear before court. Methods used include beatings with truncheons, electric shock, hanging by wrists and ankles, rape and sexual humiliation, asphyxiation with plastic bags and gas masks, and threats of physical harm to relatives. Credible reports about suspicious deaths in custody, believed to be a result of ill-treatment and torture, continue to emerge.

Restrictions on Freedom of Expression. Uzbek authorities severely restrict both freedom of information and freedom of expression. Websites containing information on sensitive issues or that are critical of the government are routinely blocked within Uzbekistan. The few independent journalists who continue to work in the country do so at great risk and are forced to self-censor due to harassment and threats of imprisonment. At least ten journalists are in prison simply for doing their job. In the last year alone, Uzbek authorities are known to have used spurious criminal defamation charges to silence three journalists. Last October, Abdumalik Boboev, a correspondent for Voice of America, was convicted of defamation, insult, and preparation or dissemination of materials that threaten public security. He was fined \$11,000—a very large fine by local standards. Ironically, he had reported on restrictions on freedom of expression, arbitrary detentions, and unfair trials of journalists and human rights defenders.

Restrictions on Freedom of Religion. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the U.S. State Department, the Uzbek government systematically and egregiously violates freedom of religion or belief and harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity, regardless of their religious affiliation. A restrictive religion law severely limits the rights of all religious communities and facilitates the Uzbek government's control over them. Authorities continue to arrest so-called independent Muslims and repress individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This policy has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons.

The Andijan Massacre. On May 13, 2005 Uzbek government forces fired into a crowd of mainly unarmed protesters in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan, killing hundreds. Ignoring repeated calls from the international community, including by the Bush Administration, Senator John

McCain, and other Members of Congress, for an independent international investigation, Uzbek authorities instead sought to silence criticism by launching an intense crackdown in Andijan. Several hundred individuals who were convicted and sentenced in closed trials in 2005 and 2006 are believed to remain in prison serving lengthy sentences. The Uzbek government continues vigorously to seek out and persecute anyone it deems to have a connection to or information about the Andijan events. Intense government pressure—taking the form of interrogations, surveillance, ostracism, and in at least one case an overt threat to life—has continued to generate new refugees from Andijan, years after the massacre. In April 2010, authorities sentenced to a 10-year prison term an Andijan refugee, Diloram Abdukodirova, who had returned to Uzbekistan following assurances to her family that she would not be harmed.

Forced Child Labor. Forced child labor in the cotton fields remains a serious concern, despite a formal ban on child labor and the government's ratification of two International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions against child labor. Information from throughout Uzbekistan's cotton-growing regions shows that the government continues to orchestrate the mass mobilization of children to harvest cotton. Each autumn, with the tacit endorsement of the government, local authorities direct the closure of primary and secondary schools in most areas outside the capital city and instruct local education departments to mobilize schoolchildren to harvest cotton, Uzbekistan's main export commodity. As many as two million children last autumn helped bring in approximately half of the country's cotton crop. Children forced to help with the cotton harvest live in filthy conditions, contract illnesses, miss school, and work daily from early morning until evening for little or no money. Hunger, exhaustion, and heat stroke are common. In the meantime, the government continues to refuse access for ILO monitors.