

UPR submission on Uzbekistan by the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan, International Partnership for Human Rights and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee:

Summary

Uzbekistan is one of the most repressive countries for internet users in the world. The authorities closely monitor and censor internet content, including by filtering material on issues such as corruption, human rights violations and religion and by blocking websites featuring criticism of their policies. Internet cafes are held under surveillance by security services and the owners of such establishments are warned not to allow customers to visit internet sites containing material that is considered inappropriate by the authorities. The excessive restrictions on the internet imposed by the authorities have resulted in widespread self-censorship among internet providers and users who fear repercussions. Those who dare to use the internet to openly criticize authorities or comment on controversial issues are highly vulnerable to intimidation and harassment.

Key recommendations:

- Respect freedom of expression in the internet.
- Refrain from systematic censoring or blocking of online content, and do not limit access to websites simply because they contain information that authorities do not like or agree with.
- Ensure that internet users can freely access and use internet resources of their choice and participate in discussion on timely issues, without facing repercussions.

Members of Uzbekistan's small community of independent journalists and human rights defenders continue to face ongoing harassment, such as surveillance, house arrest, denial of exit visas, physical assaults, detentions and politically motivated charges and convictions. A considerable number of journalists and human rights defenders currently serve prison sentences on fabricated charges. There are serious concerns about the health and well-being of these prisoners. Only one active human rights group has been granted registration, while other groups carry out their work without registration and thus legal status. The efforts of international media and NGOs to work in Uzbekistan continue to be hampered by restrictive accreditation and visa rules. Small-scale peaceful pickets staged by civil society activists and other citizens to demand respect for fundamental rights are regularly broken up by police and participants are intimidated, detained and given administrative sanctions. The Uzbek authorities have continued to reject calls for an independent and impartial investigation into the 2005 Andijan events, when government troops forcefully put down a rare mass protest and killed hundreds of civilians. No officials have been brought to justice for their role in these events.

Key recommendations:

- Stop harassing independent journalists and human rights defenders and immediately and unconditionally release all who are imprisoned on politically motivated grounds.

- Allow peaceful public protests to take place without interference and enable independent NGOs to obtain registration in an uncomplicated and quick process and to work without hindrance.
- Ensure that a thorough, independent and impartial international investigation is carried out into the 2005 Andijan events and that those responsible for the killings of civilians are held accountable.

The Uzbek authorities continue their indiscriminate and repressive campaign against “religious extremism,” where no distinction is made between individuals who endorse or advocate violence and individuals who practice their beliefs peacefully outside strict state controls. Persistent human rights violations documented in this campaign by the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) include: arrests on the basis of fabricated administrative charges; restricted access to lawyers and family members; the use of pressure to force detainees to provide “confessions” or “testimonies”; unfair trials that are held behind closed doors and characterized by gross procedural violations and where lengthy prison terms are handed down under vaguely worded Criminal Code articles. Individuals who are serving prison sentences for “religious extremism” are frequently subjected to discriminatory treatment and abuse, and IGIHRDU has received numerous reports about deaths in prison of such prisoners in recent years. Torture allegations are still rarely investigated and prosecuted.

Key recommendations:

- Put an end to the campaign of arresting and convicting independent Muslim believers for non-violent religious engagement outside of institutions and organizations strictly controlled by the state.
- Adopt effective measures in accordance with recommendations made by members of the Human Rights Council, relevant UN treaty bodies and UN special procedures to ensure, in practice, respect for the rights of detainees, the right to fair trial and the right not to be subjected to torture and ill-treatment.