

A call for swift implementation of reforms in Uzbekistan as IPHR witnesses surveillance of local defenders during visit

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On 17-21 October, IPHR visited Uzbekistan for the first time since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, at the invitation of the government. Over the past year, President Mirziyoyev's government has made significant efforts to demonstrate its openness for human rights reform and dialogue with international human rights groups, and during its visit IPHR was able to discuss these reforms with relevant state representatives.

Acknowledging the steps taken by the President over the last two years to improve Uzbekistan's dismal human rights record, IPHR representatives insisted on the importance of upholding the country's international obligations in the fields of freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement, and in guaranteeing institutional changes to ensure the full realization of these rights for the people of Uzbekistan. IPHR welcomed the Presidential decree and Supreme Court decision on the inadmissibility in courts of confessions obtained under torture as clear improvements towards the eradication of such illegal practices. The recent releases of human rights defenders, journalists, political opponents and other victims of repression were also noted as positive steps. IPHR insisted however that none of the released individuals will be free to lead normal lives until they have been fully rehabilitated, and that legislative reforms must be implemented in practice.

Against this background, IPHR representatives were extremely concerned to witness the surveillance of civil society activists during our stay and call on the authorities to urgently ensure that human rights defenders and other activists can go about their peaceful civic activism without interference. Authorities should also ensure that rights reforms announced by the government are observed and consistently implemented.

On 20 October IPHR witnessed how the home of human rights defender Agzam Turgunov was under surveillance by unknown individuals dressed in plain-clothes who were walking around the building where he lives. Agzam Turgunov reported that on 18 October two representatives of the local Mahalla committee came to his flat to find out if he was at home and to warn him that law enforcement officials had been asking about him. He told IPHR that unknown people were standing under his window and listening to his conversations and that he was followed by cars of Matiz make as he moved around the area. On the same day Bobomurod Abdullayev, an independent journalist released from detention earlier this year after a trial which was closely observed by the international community, press, social media and co-signed statements to international fora regarding the human rights situation in the country.

reported that as he ate lunch with friends in a café, he was approached and greeted by one of the secret service officers who tortured him while he was in pre-trial detention last year. It had previously been reported that this officer would be investigated in relation to the torture. On leaving the café, a group of more than a dozen people were standing on the pavement, some of whom were wearing camouflage uniform. Bobomurod Abdullayev then received a call from his son who reported that four cars were parked near his home. He came home to see the surveillance cars with two men sat in each of them and reported that the cars left only as representatives from IPHR arrived at his house.

In addition, other human rights defenders and journalists also reported being subjected to surveillance over the same days, including Tatyana Davlatova, Dilmurod Sayyid and Malokhat Eshankulova as well as entrepreneur Elena Agibalova, who has criticized the tax authorities in Uzbekistan.

IPHR is extremely concerned at the continued surveillance on members of the human rights community in Uzbekistan, which puts significant strain on families of human rights defenders and journalists and causes re-traumatisation and stress of those whose loved ones have previously spent time in prison on politically motivated grounds. Government efforts to reform and democratize the country should be supported to ensure an end to such practices.

IPHR calls on the international community to urge the government to demonstrate the genuine nature of the important reforms led by President Mirziyoyev by swiftly ending the surveillance and harassment of peaceful civic activists and ensuring that the reforms are implemented consistently and that the rights to freedoms of expression and association are respected, not only in legislation but also in practice.