

**Statement of Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Uzbekistan: Are There Prospects for Change?
July 25, 2006**

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this Helsinki Commission briefing on Uzbekistan. Our purpose is to examine whether, after almost 20 years of President Karimov's rule, there are any prospects for positive change in Uzbekistan. For many years, Uzbekistan has been a repressive authoritarian state, without legal opposition or tolerance of dissenting viewpoints. But since the events in Andijon in May 2005, the situation in that long-suffering country has deteriorated still further.

The countrywide crackdown on human rights activists, religious groups and members of opposition parties and movements has continued. Scores of them have been arrested. Just in the last few days, we've learned of the disappearance of Tolib Yakubov, the leader of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan. Helsinki Commission staff have known and dealt with him since 1991. Tolib Yakubov has bravely persevered in his campaign to monitor rights violations, despite threats, harassment and continuous intimidation, not to mention the arrests and beatings of many of his colleagues and even the death of some of them. We anxiously await word on his whereabouts and well-being.

Given the situation in Uzbekistan, the timeliness of our briefing is obvious. As it happens, among our speakers today are people who know all too well the mechanics of Uzbek repression. In 1992, Dr. Abdurahim Polat, leader of Birlik, was almost killed on a Tashkent street by thugs. The same year he had to flee his homeland, which he has not seen since. Muhammad Salih, leader of Erk, was also forced into exile, where he has remained ever since. His brothers, however, were

arrested and suffered in Uzbek jails, where two of them remain. Gulam Umarov's father, Sanjar Umarov, leader of the Sunshine Coalition, is also today in prison.

Clearly, attempting to engage in opposition activity in Uzbekistan is very dangerous. The personal experience of these three witnesses lends their testimony a special weight and poignancy.

To round out their viewpoints, we have invited – once again – Dr. Martha Olcott, our preeminent analyst of Central Asia. Happily, she has managed to study the region for the last quarter century in relative safety, though not without many adventures. I am sure she will give our discussion a big picture perspective and the benefit of comparative analysis.

The Congress is working to craft a U.S. response to the Andijon killings and the increased repression by the Uzbek Government. For instance, my Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Promotion Act, H.R. 5382, in addition to providing funding for increased human rights work in the region, would place sanctions on Uzbekistan by creating a visa ban, an arms ban and an asset freeze on President Karimov, other regime leaders, and their families. It was marked up in my human rights subcommittee just before the 4th of July recess, and I hope to see it considered before the 109th Congress adjourns in a few months.