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Presentation for Helsinki Commission Briefing

“Imprisoned in Uzbekistan: Politically Motivated Cases”

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Mr. Moderator, I'd like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the leadership of the Helsinki Commission for organizing this briefing. In fact, this is my second opportunity to discuss my case at a Commission event. Senator Cardin and Congressman Smith have taken an active interest for many years in Central Asia, and I know I am only one of the many individuals who have been helped -- and even rescued -- by their involvement and passionate commitment to human rights.

Today, I am filled with hope. This was not always the case. After being torn from my family, thrown into an open cell and exposed to the frigid Uzbekistan winter in my shirt sleeves; after being convicted for a crime I did not commit; after being kicked, beaten and tortured by guards and cellmates alike; after being gassed and choked and mentally tormented; indeed, after being denied nearly every human right that we are discussing here today; I almost lost everything ... my speaking voice, my sanity, my family, my life and, yes, my hope.

And then suddenly one day, I was set free. Yes, that morning I woke up as a prisoner and that evening my granddaughter, whom I had not held or seen since she was an infant, was bouncing upon my knee.

This is a true story of what happens when hope is mobilized through perseverance. But it is not my story. It is the story of the cotton workers, no, the cotton slaves of Uzbekistan.

For the past 25 years, my beloved country has been under the rule of one man, Islam Karimov, the Communist Party leader under the former Soviet Union. Profits from growing cotton dominate Uzbekistan's economy and fuel corruption within the government. Farmers are compelled to grow cotton and sell it to the government for next to no money. And each year, Uzbekistan's government forces about 2 million people – including doctors, teachers and children – to pick the crop, and paying a minimum wage of less than a 7 cents/kg, while selling cotton for world prices. This is happening today. Right now.

Before prison, I had a good life. An amazingly charmed life especially compared to those working in Uzbekistan's feudal cotton sector. After the fall of the Soviet Union, I saw an opportunity in the need to assist in modernizing my country. I helped found Uzbekistan's leading communications company, developed venture capital projects in the energy and transportation industries, and founded an international business school in Tashkent. I became a successful businessman in independent Uzbekistan and looked forward to finding new opportunities.

Yet, I could not turn a blind eye to what was happening in Uzbekistan's cotton fields. In 2003, I began dabbling in politics and secretly helped to fund the Free Peasant opposition party, an organization that was working to give farmers a voice and power over their own land.

I went into politics not for the sake of power or ambition but in order to establish justice and order in my homeland. A very important role in the development of my character and world outlook was played by my family. My father Giyas Jakubovich Umarov in his scientific research always pursued truthfulness, a principle I inherited. And there are lots of people like me among Uzbekistan's intelligentsia - the trouble is that they are scattered, and if they try to act on their convictions, they are brutally suppressed.

But after two long years, nothing seemed to change. I grew increasingly frustrated. That's when I knew I had to do something more. In early 2005, I decided to use my position and influence to form a new movement -- the Sunshine Coalition -- to promote dialogue with the regime, and openly pushed for socio-economic and democratic reform.

A few months later, in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan, thousands of citizens took to the streets in a peaceful protest against poor living conditions and government corruption. So what did the government do? Troops opened fire, gunning down and killing hundreds of men, women, and children as they tried to flee. It was a massacre. Not surprisingly, the government tried to cover up the enormous scale of the violence. But truth has a way of coming out. And although I understood it would be dangerous, I spoke out publicly about this massacre, criticizing Uzbekistan's government.

Not long after this atrocity, I visited the United States, seeking support for the Sunshine Coalition from Uzbek expatriates and U.S. officials. My wife and four of our five children had already moved here, in part because of what was happening back home.

A couple of days after returning to Uzbekistan, I received a phone call from a fellow opposition party member who informed me that authorities were raiding Sunshine Coalition headquarters. I rushed over and when I arrived I heard loud voices inside. But when I banged on the door, no one would come out. I turned to leave and, suddenly, I was grabbed off the street in broad daylight and stuffed into a car.

Next thing I remember was waking up in a cell with blood on my jacket. My mind was fuzzy for days after. They must have drugged me. There I remained for four months before my trial even began, being interrogated continuously, and often beaten on the head. At one point, a car backed up to my cell window and pumped in exhaust. I dropped down on my belly, pressed my mouth against the narrow slit between my cell door and the floor gasping for air, desperately trying to stay alive.

My trial was the next day, January 30, 2006, President Karimov's birthday. I was accused of creating an unsanctioned political organization as well as a litany of other trumped up charges. At that point I still had hope. I was a romantic. But when the judge ignored my lawyer and listened only to the prosecutor, it soon became clear that I wasn't going free. How I was supposed to endure another two, maybe even three years of this treatment? Then they read the sentence: fourteen-and-a-half years! For what?

I was sent to a prison colony, and quickly placed in solitary confinement in a tiny cell with a concrete floor, an open toilet, and no sink. I was kept there first for 17 days, then 15 days. But each time my stay was almost up – and believe me, I counted every single day – officials would extend it for another two or three weeks. This happened over and over, my hopes of returning to the general prison population constantly crushed. This went on for 14 months.

It's very easy to go crazy in solitary. You dwell on things. You feel like you're losing your mind. I was not allowed any contact with my family. I could not even write to them. And any letters they wrote me were torn to pieces right in front of me by the prison guards. It was perhaps the worst torture I endured! During my first year in prison, my son took the train to see me 20 times, and 20 times was turned away.

But my lowest point came in January 2008, when I was thrown in the “monkey cage,” that cell I mentioned at the start of my talk that was open to the elements. The first time I was put in there, I nearly froze to death. The temperature was routinely below freezing (may be minus 10 C) and all I had were light pants and a shirt. No shoes, no socks, no hat. The second time they threw me in there, because I refused to sign a bogus confession saying that the United States gave me \$20 million to overthrow Uzbekistan's government, my cellmates nearly beat me to death. They were ordered to try and make me sign. They broke my thumb and choked me, permanently damaging my vocal chords. But I refused to sign. They jumped on my shackled ankles, scarring me forever. But I did not sign.

It wasn't until three years into my imprisonment, that I was finally allowed to see my wife with daughters and my lawyer. But I barely recognized them. The torture had gotten to me. I had lost all hope that I'd ever get out.

One day while I was in the prison hospital because my health had drastically deteriorated, I was summoned to the administration building. I assumed they were going to lengthen my sentence or deny me amnesty. But when I walked into the room, a man I later learned was a judge called me Sanjar-aka, a term of respect. And within minutes I was freed! Just like that. I could not believe it. Just when all seemed lost, I was free and

reunited with my family, who had been debriefed a few days earlier by the US embassy.

How do I understand my arrest, conviction and torture? Uzbekistan's political system refuses to hear or even tolerate sincere attempts at reform and so I ended up a "prisoner of conscience." I am not so naïve to think that everything in the country is the result of a direct order by the President. However the system he created allows corrupt officials to abuse their powers in his name.

As for my release, did Uzbekistan's government suddenly see the error of its ways? I wish it were so. No, I was freed because of the perseverance of others. What I didn't know while I was being subjected to the worst kinds of indignities, was that wife and children had worked tirelessly for my release. They reached out to international human rights groups. They raised my case in the US Congress, including at the Helsinki Commission. And they contacted the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN Human Rights Commission, the predecessor to the Human Rights Council. I was freed due to strong international pressure, including a robust public campaign by human rights organizations and the efforts of diplomats.

But I am one of the lucky ones. For the most part, international pressure on Uzbekistan has been sorely lacking. There are thousands of political prisoners in the world and millions of people forced into hard labor. But that can and must change. That's why I continue pressing for reform in my native land even as I reside in freedom and security with my family near Memphis, Tennessee.

In December there will be elections for Uzbekistan's Parliament. Unfortunately no party in parliament is independent of the ruling regime, and in fact, no opposition parties are registered in Uzbekistan. Which is why everyone, including the ruling regime, must understand that with power comes responsibility, as well as a responsibility for the wellbeing of its people in the near future! I sincerely hope that a newly elected parliament along with the current administration will ensure fair elections for a new president which will take place in March of 2015. But any Government that

is unable or unwilling to hear healthy criticism sooner or later will be doomed.

I would like to take this opportunity to call for the immediate release of the 34 political prisoners listed in the excellent Human Rights Watch report. But that should only be the beginning: many others unjustly jailed in Uzbekistan should be released. That would be a good and essential step towards national reconciliation.

In conclusion, let me again thank the Commission's leadership and dedicated staff for organizing this briefing and inviting me to speak here today. I look forward to answering any questions you might have