

# Testimony :: H.E. Abdulaziz Komilov

Ambassador - Republic of Uzbekistan

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to testify for such a respected institution as the Helsinki Commission. Please allow me to thank you for the invitation and for the opportunity to express our point of view on the development perspectives of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

At the same time allow me to object the title of today's hearings "Uzbekistan: Stifled Democracy, Human Rights in Decline". It seems unjust rendering unilateral judgment prior a discussion of the issues at hands.

The Uzbek Government has always been completely open and ready for the dialogue on a whole range of questions. We are happy to have a transparent and candid discussion on any issue.

In this endeavor there has been exemplary cooperation between United States and Uzbekistan. Over a hundred US Senators and Congressmen have visited Uzbekistan in the last 3 years. Dozens of American delegations from various US Government agencies have come to Tashkent since the beginning of 2003.

Mr. Chairman, I am personally very grateful for your constant willingness to carefully consider and understand the complicated and sometimes controversial processes occurring both in our country and Central Asia.

We also appreciate the high level relations and deep trust that we have developed with the representatives of the Helsinki Commission, especially with Ronald McNamara, Michael Ochs, Knox Thames, and Dorothy Taft.

We have also been engaged in a fruitful dialogue with the State Department's Assistant Secretary Lorne Craner. Our relationship allows us to have ongoing open discussions and occasional disagreements on the fundamental issues of the ongoing political, economic, and social development of Uzbekistan.

Mr. Chairman,  
Members of the Commission,

It is not my intention today to speak at length on what we have achieved in the realm of democratic development and economic reforms. It is covered extensively in the bulletins that were handed out to you. These reports give a detailed picture of the dynamics of developments in Uzbekistan.

However, I'd like to state at the outset that Uzbekistan does not see any alternative to democratic development. We are working to build a rule-of-law state that guarantees basic rights to its citizens and respects the main principles of international law.

I assure you that these are not empty statements. Let me give you some examples.

During the 13 years of independence, the parliament of Uzbekistan has passed over 120 laws and ratified over 60 international treaties regarding the protection of human rights.

Citizens of Uzbekistan are free to follow their religious beliefs. This right is guaranteed by the Constitution and the Laws.

During the entire period of the Soviet rule the number of pilgrims from Uzbekistan to the Muslim sacred places was only 86 people. Since Independence about 60 thousand citizens of Uzbekistan have made pilgrimage to Mecca.

There are the Islamic University, Higher Clerical Institute, 10 Islamic Madrassahs and 2 seminaries in Uzbekistan, where representatives of new generation pursue their education.

In 1990 only 211 religious organizations were registered in Uzbekistan. Currently, more than 2000, including Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Bahai, Krishna, Buddhist and others.

As of today, over 300 humanitarian and human rights NGOs, and over 3000 local associations have been registered in the Republic.

Uzbekistan is the first country of the former Soviet Union to have invited and received the UN special rapporteur on torture, Teo van Boven. Based on his recommendations, the government has adopted a National Plan on implementing Articles of Convention Against Torture And Other Cruel, Inhuman Or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Penal institutions have become more open. For example, the number of visits to places of detention by representatives of the Red Cross International Committee has increased ten times over the past two years. As a result of our cooperation with NGOs and other organizations we have reached an agreement to allow independent human rights advocates to monitor places of detention.

We can also see an active process of the liberalization of criminal legislation. We have lowered the penalties for arrest and detainment for lesser crimes. This helped us to reduce the number of prisoners by half since 2000. Today, Uzbekistan has the lowest proportion of prisoners per 100, 000 population among both former Soviet Republics and Eastern European countries.

An ongoing evolution in our nation's criminal legislation has also influenced the issues of capital punishment. In 1991 capital punishment was provided for in 35 articles of criminal code, now it

is applicable only in 2, terrorism and intentional homicide.

As part of our nation's ongoing evolution of our legal system, Parliament has started discussing a Habeas Corpus bill.

We admit that abuse of power by some representatives of law enforcement agencies is still an issue today. We conduct a system-defined battle against it. Abuses of power are immediately terminated when uncovered and the offenders are punished according to our criminal code. At the same time, I must note that many accusations against Uzbekistan in this issue are unjustified. The recent finding of a commission investigating the death of A. Shelkovenko proves this. In order to demonstrate its commitment to total transparency and no answer baseless charges by several human rights organizations, Uzbekistan invited representatives from U.S. Embassies both in Moscow and Tashkent, the international organizations "Freedom House" and "Human Rights Watch," forensic experts and criminal law specialists from Canada and the USA to conduct an independent investigation.

The commission established that A. Shelkovenko's death came as a result of suicide. During his detention, Shelkovenko was not abused or tortured.

I emphasize once again that our countries share similar views regarding the question: "What should be done?" Despite numerous challenges, Uzbekistan has decisively rejected its Soviet-imposed totalitarian past and is gradually moving forward to become a prosperous state based on a total commitment to the rule of law. These trends are in sync with US interests and values and the reforms implemented since 1991 are now irreversible.

Dear members of the Commission,

We acknowledge that much still remains to be done to build a full-fledged democratic state. Problems exist and we don't hide from them. However, we must acknowledge that the ongoing political evolution of Uzbekistan strongly depends on a number of factors that cannot be ignored.

Among these I specifically point out Uzbekistan's historic heritage and the unique circumstances of its external environment.

Contrary to the USA, where the history of democracy spans over 200 years, Uzbekistan will celebrate only 13 years of its independence in September of 2004. Centuries of our colonial past have had a serious effect on our country.

Up to today we have made and continue to make enormous efforts to overcome the deadening legacy of communist ideology and its moribund economic concepts.

The scale of tasks we face speaks for itself: construction of a democratic state, the fundamental transformation of our country's Soviet economic legacy with its emphasis on the production of raw materials; the recovery of Uzbek historic heritage and the restoration of the country's ecology, all of which were mangled or destroyed by seventy-four years of Soviet dictatorship.

Our external security situation also requires our unwavering attention. Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has encountered the destructive influence of deepening civil conflicts on our borders, both in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. We have had to resist a rising flood of weapons, drugs, and extremist literature lapping at our borders from these conflicts.

Despite the efforts of the U.S.-led antiterrorist coalition the level of threats to regional security is still rather high.

I'll mention just one fact. According to the estimates of some specialists, during 1979-2001 about 100,000 people trained in Afghanistan's terrorist camps.

Today, these well-trained terrorists have spread throughout the world, attacking peaceful nations, their independence, freedom, and values.

Where are they now? Some of them were involved in planning the attack on the USA on 9/11; others were responsible for the train bombings in Spain in March. Still other groups remain active in the frontier zones between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These forces continue to present a serious threat to stability and the security of Central Asia.

As President of Uzbekistan I.Karimov said during the last summit of Central Asian states in Astana: "Terrorism and extremism have been able to regroup and they are becoming more active again launching their undermining actions. The scale of the narcotic aggression is not declining, the elements of instability are preserving in the neighboring regions". According to his evaluations all these together leads to the conditions of "strategic uncertainty in the region".

Unfortunately, unlike the United States, Uzbekistan is not separated from major terrorism centers by two oceans. The threat of international terrorism is an everyday reality to us; we need only look across our borders. More than two years before America's tragic 9-11 encounter with fundamentalist fanaticism, extremists exploded several bombs in the heart of Tashkent. This attack was not planned half a world away, it was plotted next door. Had the terrorists succeeded and exported their fundamentalist revolution to Uzbekistan, then the entire Central Asian region could have become a "heart of darkness" threatening the hopes, dreams and prosperity of the entire world.

Our people endured three generations of dictatorship in the name of "building Communism;" we are determined to prevent our nation from becoming a component of a similar utopian dream of "establishing an Islamic Caliphate." Such a fate would not be a dream; it would be nightmare beyond imagining.

Mr. Chairman,  
Dear members of the Commission,

Our relationship with the U.S. is based on long-term goals and a common concern with problems of regional and global security. We face problems that require a cooperative response.

First, in the sphere of fighting neo-terrorism, we must deepen our cooperation at every level, particularly in the fields of contemporary military and technical infrastructure. Arrayed against us are vast financial resources, special training camps for fighters and a deep-seated ideology based on fundamentalism, political radicalism and intolerance.

Terrorists cannot be defeated only on the battlefield. We cannot stop the people who are hypnotized by radicalism and infected by terror. Our nation's main task now is to prevent the emergence of new followers of Usama bin Laden and Hazb Ut-Tahrir.

Our main weapon is enlightenment. 80% of the Uzbek population is Muslim, who follow the peaceful and tolerant traditions of the Sunni Hanafiyah school of law. Uzbekistan has been an integral part of the Muslim world for many centuries. We are reviving our heritage and we won't allow foreign fanatics to take it away from us.

Together, we have to create a strong barrier to all their attempts to impose "ideology of hatred" on us.

In this mission, Uzbekistan could offer its broad experience and historic practices of longstanding traditions of tolerance and religious moderation. I believe this task can draw upon the deep undiscovered potential in the Uzbek-American strategic partnership.

Secondly, we must work together to stabilize the situation throughout Central Asia, transforming the region into a significant component of global security. Uzbekistan advocates developing multilateral contacts in Central Asia, involving Afghanistan in a system of advanced and mutually beneficial regional cooperation.

At the last Summit of Heads of States of Central Asia in Astana, Uzbekistan unveiled an initiative to create a Central Asian Common Market. Following Uzbekistan's proposal, the issues of forming food, water, energy and trade consortiums are being discussed within the framework of Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO).

Uzbekistan also supports the development of trade and an investment relationship between the USA and Central Asian countries under recently signed TIFA agreement.

Mr. Chairman,

In the last 3 years our countries have reached an impressive level of teamwork, which has helped us to face modern challenges with confidence, standing shoulder to shoulder. Uzbekistan is a resolutely dependable partner of the US. Three years ago, Uzbekistan was the first of the former Soviet Republics to join the International Antiterrorist Coalition and put its military infrastructure at the disposal of the U.S. We supported our American partners in solving serious international problems: Iraq, Cuba, nuclear non-proliferation, drug trafficking, etc. Uzbekistan is taking an active part in a number of transatlantic initiatives.

It is critical now to preserve the spirit of our strategic partnership, and utilize our acquired potential. Any increase in distrust between us will only assist those interested in weakening our unity in the International Antiterrorist Coalition.

Unresolved contemporary problems on global and regional levels require us to be unshakeable in our commitment and strengthen our partnership. Uzbekistan is ready to continue open cooperation based on common vitally important interests that define the strategic character of our relationship.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to answer all your questions.