

UNREST IN UZBEKISTAN: CRISIS AND PROSPECTS



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Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 55 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held at 1:32 p.m. in room 138, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.

Panelists present: Hon. Sam Brownback, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin, Ranking Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Hon. Joseph R. Pitts, Commissioner, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Hon. Mike McIntyre, Commissioner, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Ron McNamara, International Policy Director, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Samuel Žbogar, Slovenia Ambassador to United States on behalf of OSCE; Michael Cromartie, Commissioner, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom; Martha Brill Olcott, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Abdurahim Polat, Opposition Party Leader, Uzbekistan; and Daniel Kimmage, Central Asia Regional Analyst, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Mr. SMITH. We'll begin this briefing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission. My name is Chris Smith. We'll be joined very shortly by Chairman Brownback. I'm the Co-Chairman of the Commission on Security Cooperation in Europe. And we're joined by fellow Commissioner Joseph Pitts from Pennsylvania. And then we will do an introduction of all of our very distinguished panelists.

Almost a year ago the Helsinki Commission held a hearing on Uzbekistan. At that time, we heard testimony about the closed nature of Uzbek society. Some of the consequences now seem to be unfolding in the Fergana Valley.

After Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, we may have become used to largely peaceful transfers of power in former Soviet republics. Clearly, as we read about the ongoing situation in Andijan, it was too good to be true.

It seems to me, that after the revolutions in the former USSR over the last 18 months and the bloody confrontation last Friday in Uzbekistan, that all bets are off in that country. We have now witnessed the most lethal use of force unleashed by an OSCE participating State against protesters in the former Soviet space.

In March 2002, when President Karimov came to Washington to sign the agreement on strategic cooperation with the United States, I participated in his meeting with the congressional leadership and, as a matter of fact raised issues relevant to human rights.

During that conversation, he said a very interesting thing. Responding to expressions of gratitude from some of the other Members of Congress for Uzbekistan's cooperation against international terrorism, President Karimov countered that he should be grateful to the United States for getting rid of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.

That, he explained, effectively ended the most serious security threat to Uzbekistan.

Yet President Karimov never drew the appropriate conclusions from his own geopolitical premises. Instead of seeing the fall of the Taliban and their allies as an opportunity to loosen the state's grip on Uzbek society, he made gestures calculated to appease Western states calling for reform. For example, a few independent human rights groups were registered. Tashkent allowed the U.N. rapporteur on torture to visit the Uzbek penal system. And some policemen who had tortured detainees were themselves convicted and jailed.

But no fundamental changes have occurred. Though the U.N. rapporteur concluded that torture was systemic in Uzbek jails and Tashkent drew up an action plan to combat torture, the practice continues.

Last December's parliamentary election went much as did previous Uzbek elections. Even though Uzbek spokesmen and apologists proclaimed the participation of five government-created political parties to be major progress, the OSCE rightly refused to send a full-fledged observer mission.

No opposition parties were registered or allowed to take part. Individual members of opposition parties could not run, despite assurances from Uzbek officials that they would be able to do so.

Moreover, widespread religious persecution continues in the country. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recently recommended to Secretary of State Rice that Uzbekistan be designated a country of particular concern, a CPC country, because of the severe, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

I agree with that recommendation, as designating Uzbekistan would send a clear message that the United States will not tolerate the continued oppression of selected Muslims and other religious groups.

Today, almost 15 years after independence, Uzbekistan remains a police state, and President Karimov is confronting what I fear is only the beginning of a major challenge, largely of his own making.

As we know, the United States maintains a base in southern Uzbekistan. However, if peaceful protests spread throughout the country and Uzbek forces respond indiscriminately with deadly violence, the United States would be forced to reevaluate its strategic partnership with Uzbekistan.

I'd like to now yield to my good friend and colleague Joe Pitts for any opening comments he might have.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for conducting this important briefing.

And I want to thank the distinguished witnesses for coming today.

In the interests of time, I will yield. And I'm not sure who to yield to, by the way. Who's the chair?

Mr. McNAMARA. Yes. My name is Ron McNamara. I'm currently serving as the Helsinki Commission's International Policy Director.

I'm pleased to welcome you here to this briefing, the latest Commission initiative focused on developments in Uzbekistan. The Commission has had a long series of engagement on issues relating to that country, and I would encourage you to visit the Commission's Web site where all of the materials are available, at www.csce.gov.

I see that our Ranking Member from the House, Mr. Cardin, has arrived. I know that our Chairman, Senator Brownback, is en route as well. And I should also mention that Commissioner McIntyre has arrived.

So certainly we'll entertain any statements or comments that they may have before turning to our panelists.

Mr. CARDIN. Well, Ron, thank you. Let me apologize for being a few minutes late. And obviously the members will be moving in and out. On these briefings, the main purpose is for the Commission to get a better understanding of what's happening in trouble spots of the world.

Uzbekistan presents to us a real challenge, a real dilemma. There's no way that we can justify the actions of the government and what is happening in that country. They are not complying with Helsinki commitments. And we have a right to expect that they will, in fact, do that.

We don't condone at all the violence of the population and what they're doing, the rebels. That obviously needs to be brought under control. But the manner in which the government has responded, in just creating an untenable situation, the failure to comply with Helsinki principles, is of great concern to all of us.

So I have a full statement that I'm just going to make sure is available for the record which expresses in detail these concerns. But the main purpose for briefings is for us to get more information so that our Commission can function to bring these matters to the international attention.

So with that in mind, Ron, you noticed that Commissioner McIntyre is here, and I'll be glad to yield to Commissioner McIntyre.

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you very much. I too will be brief.

Having been to Uzbekistan when I was visiting Afghanistan in August of 2003, I found it very interesting. We did spend quite a bit of time in the palace with President Karimov. And so now to see how things have transpired since that visit that we had then has been very concerning to us. And so I'd look forward to hearing the testimony today.

I am also interested in how these developments have affected the stability of the government and our concerns, because we know of our military relationship as well. And as a member not only of this Commission but of the Armed Services Committee, I share concerns about the unrest that is going on in Uzbekistan.

So thank you very much. And we'll look forward to the hearing.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much. As with all Commission briefings, we'll first hear from our expert panelists before opening up to questions from our Commissioners and if time permits from the audience as well.

When approaching the microphone that's been provided, please state your name, any affiliation, and pose your question as succinctly as possible to a specific member of the panel.

An unofficial transcript of today's proceedings will be available within 24 hours on the commission's Web site, www.csce.gov.

I'm pleased to introduce—and again, the panelists will begin subject to the arrival of our Chairman and whatever statement he might have.

Our first panelist is Ambassador Žbogar, Ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia to the United States. Ambassador Žbogar will be speaking on behalf of the OSCE Chairman in Office, Foreign Minister Rupel.

The OSCE is engaged with this crisis through the center in Tashkent, as well as monitoring refugee flows in the border regions in neighboring southern Kyrgyzstan.

Minister Rupel has expressed the OSCE's readiness to assist in preventing further bloodshed as well as in finding a lasting solution to developments of late.

Next we'll hear from Michael Cromartie, who serves as a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Mr. Cromartie is a 2004 Bush appointee to the Commission and also serves as Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center here in Washington.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom recently recommended to the Secretary of State that Uzbekistan be designated a country of particular concern because of the severe, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom in that country.

Next we'll hear from Dr. Martha Olcott, a Senior Associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and one of the foremost experts on Central Asia, who has testified several times before our Commission. She specializes in the problems of transitions in Central Asia and the Caucasus region, as well as security challenges in the Caspian region more generally.

She testified at the Commission's 2004 hearing on human rights in Uzbekistan. And we welcome her as well.

Next we'll be hearing from Dr. Abdurahim Polat, who testified at that same Commission hearing on Uzbekistan in 2004.

Since 1989, Dr. Polat has been the leader of Birlik, one of the main Uzbek opposition parties. Dr. Polat had to leave Uzbekistan in 1993, after he was almost beaten to death on the streets of Tashkent in June 1992.

Since then, he has been an opposition activist in exile, first in Turkey, then in the United States, where he now resides. In February 1998, he received political asylum status here in the United States.

Finally, we'll hear from Daniel Kimmage, who works at Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, as a Central Asia regional analyst. He writes frequently about Central Asia and is one of the best informed analysts here in Washington.

He also writes about the Arab world and Russia, with a particular focus on the ideology of Islamic movements.

We'll now turn to Ambassador Žbogar.

Amb. ŽBOGAR. Thank you very much.

Members of the Commission, and ladies and gentlemen, first, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak here at the Commission and to brief you on the activities and the role of the OSCE in Uzbekistan.

The OSCE is closely monitoring the situation in Uzbekistan through its presence on the ground. As it was mentioned, OSCE has a center in Tashkent that has been in con-

stant touch with the Uzbek Government since the conflict in Andijan started on the 13th of May.

The OSCE Chairman in Office, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, Dimitrij Rupel, has expressed concern about recent events in the city of Andijan on the 15th of May. He has encouraged all sides to work toward a peaceful resolution of the present crisis.

And to this end, the OSCE and he, in the name of the OSCE, have offered assistance to address both immediate and deeper causes of unrest in order to find a sustainable solution.

The very fact that the OSCE has a presence on the spot allows the OSCE community to have a clearer picture of the situation on the ground and it can play a key role in working with the parties to reduce tensions.

First of all, the OSCE stands ready to facilitate immediate political dialogue. As the Chairman-in-Office put it, "Further loss of human lives must be avoided at all cost. Any differences that may exist should not represent an excuse for the use of force on either side,".

This is something that the OSCE is well placed to perform through the center, through the Chairmanship in Office and/or through an envoy of the Chairman.

Second, the organization is ready to assist Uzbekistan with upholding its OSCE commitments. The center in Tashkent is already implementing such assistance through concrete projects across the OSCE three dimensions of security, the political, military, economic, and the environmental and human dimensions.

The concrete examples of what OSCE is doing already are the prison reform program, the media program, small and medium enterprise development, water management, border management, and helping with trafficking in human beings.

Third, in addition to existing projects, OSCE has particular expertise and experience in a range of issues related to conflict prevention and civil society building.

Through its institutions, like the representative on freedom of the media, the high commissioner on national minorities, the organization is particularly well placed to focus on issues such as access to information, promotion of interactive dialogue, and human rights training for police, military and prison officials.

If requested by the Uzbek authorities, such short-term activities could have an immediate impact.

Fourth, trial monitoring activities, particularly with regard to the case of the 23 businessmen in Andijan, could be conducted with immediate effect.

And fifth, in close cooperation with the Uzbek authorities and possibly partner organizations, such as the United Nations, the OSCE is ready to help conduct or support an international investigation into recent events in Andijan.

The future involvement of the OSCE will depend on several factors. The most important will be the political will of the Uzbek Government.

So first, what is needed in Uzbekistan now? We have immediate needs and we have short- and medium-term needs.

Immediately, there is a need for prevention of further use of force and/or prevention of humanitarian problems on the border region with Kyrgyzstan. There is a need for independent international investigation of the events in Andijan. There is a need to allow the

local population and international community to get information. There is a need to monitor trials, arrests and demonstrations. And there is a need for closer cooperation in fighting terrorism. These are all immediate needs.

Short- and medium-term needs would be deepening of democratization processes, like promotion of media freedom, rule of law and development of civil society. And there is also a short- and medium-term need to intensify the speed of economic reform through further liberalization.

What could be the possible OSCE activities and OSCE role in the future? OSCE should focus on the following possibilities: First, follow very closely the developments related to events in Andijan and prevent other violent actions and help with post-conflict and post-trauma assistance.

Next, OSCE could have a role in confidence-building measures within the country and with the international community. And OSCE has a role in reaching out to the local community.

Next, OSCE should be involved in international investigation of what happened. An international expert commission should be established, and if it materializes, the OSCE could offer international experts, like anti-terrorism, policing, intelligence, prison, media, et cetera.

Next, OSCE could tailor training based on the outcome of the investigation. The president acknowledged himself that Andijan happened also as a consequence of serious shortcomings in the work of different services, like military, police, prison and intelligence.

Next, the role of mass media: There has been an information blockade on TV and Internet, and the government informed very late and has not offered clear answers to several very important questions. This is something that OSCE could address. Then OSCE could establish programs in promoting the freedom of media through legal assistance, furthering access to information, holding of training for local journalists, for government agency official spokespersons.

Next, is the trial monitoring activities. OSCE could get involved in close monitoring of trials related to the events in Andijan.

And of course the last, economic evaluation and assessment: An investigation should be conducted of business development, for example, the availability of credit for small and medium business development. There should be strengthening of business associations and improve their lobbying capabilities with the government and with parliament. And the OSCE could provide farmers and businesspeople with knowledge about their legal rights.

So these are some of the activities that OSCE has already been undertaking and others that OSCE could undertake or could engage in Uzbekistan with the aim of helping stabilize the situation and in helping the Uzbekistan Government approach necessary reforms.

For all the activities of the OSCE, given the role of the OSCE, the consensus role in the OSCE, for all the activities that the mission at the center in Tashkent will perform in Uzbekistan, we need the approval of the Uzbekistan Government.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much, Ambassador.

Mr. Cromartie?

Mr. CROMARTIE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As you know, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent government agency that was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The commission monitors religious freedom in other countries and advises the President and Secretary of State and Congress on how to best advance religious freedom abroad.

In October of last year, the commission visited Uzbekistan and met with government officials, human rights activists, religious leaders and former prisoners in the Fergana Valley, including in Andijan as well as Tashkent and Samarkand.

The commission notes that many of the Uzbek Government policies toward religious groups and individuals foreshadowed the tragedy in Andijan. In April 2005, the commission found the Government of Uzbekistan to be responsible for severe human rights violations, including freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and religion, and recommended to the Secretary of State that Uzbekistan be named a country of particular concern.

Uzbekistan has a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function and that criminalizes all unregistered religious activity.

The 1998 Uzbek law on religion is used by government officials to deny registration of various religious groups, particularly minority religious communities, resulting in an effective ban on activities of these groups. At present, some 100 unregistered religious communities of all faiths are seeking registration.

The Uzbek Government also exercises a high degree of control over the manner in which the Islamic faith is practiced. There are very few outlets for Muslims to learn about or practice their faith, other than those provided by the government via the Muslim Spiritual Board.

After 1998, the Uzbek Government authorities closed 3,000 of the reported 5,000 functioning mosques in the country. The USCIRF delegation in Uzbekistan experienced directly the government's determination to monitor the activities of Muslim leaders.

Certain officials from the Uzbek interior ministry insisted on being present at the commission's meetings with local imams in Samarkand and in cities in the Fergana Valley. Even more heavily handed tactics were used in the city of Fergana, where Uzbek security agents made overt efforts to disrupt the commission delegation's meeting with Uzbek human rights activists, former prisoners and other victims of repression.

Government authorities crack down harshly on Muslim individuals, groups and mosques that do not conform to government prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This crackdown has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom are denied the right to due process.

There are also credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention. There are, according to the 2004 State Department Human Rights Report, approximately 5,500 prisoners in Uzbekistan who have been convicted because they chose to exercise their faith outside the state's control or who the government claims are associated with extremist groups.

Mr. Chairman, would you like me to stop while you make a statement?

Mr. BROWNBACK. Please go ahead.

Mr. CROMARTIE. Sure? OK.

Confessions are the main evidence used to convict persons accused of membership in suspect organizations. Such confessions are often obtained before the accused has gained access to a lawyer or doctor, and frequently result from ill treatment or torture.

A defendant's lawyer frequently is denied access to his or her client until after a confession has been obtained, although such access should be granted within 24 hours under Uzbek law.

There is also a widespread reliance on guilt by association. Members of the same family are arrested and sentenced for alleged involvement with proscribed religious organizations. Any outward display of piety can arise suspicion and may lead to sanctions, including possible arrest.

Now security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members from Hizb-ut-Tahrir and other groups that claim a religious linkage. But these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers.

Because the Uzbek criminal justice system is not transparent, it is impossible to know fully the basis on which people have been detained or convicted. Nonetheless, the State Department, as well as domestic and international human rights organizations, concluded that many of these prisoners have been convicted on charges that relate to their religious beliefs or alleged association, not on specific evidence or advocacy of acts of violence.

I should note that USCIRF's recommendation that Uzbekistan be designated a CPC should not—should not—in any way be construed as a defense of H.T., an extremist and highly intolerant organization that promotes hatred against moderate Muslims, the West, Jews and others.

The strict governmental control over the content and character of Islamic teaching, worship, and practices results in the aspiration on the part of some in Uzbekistan to seek alternative voices and sources of religious authority. The USCIRF delegation heard from many people that the absence of permitted religious alternatives only serves to generate—it only serves to generate more support for underground groups, including H.T.

The U.N. special rapporteur on torture concluded in his February 2003 report on Uzbekistan that, and I quote, "Torture or similar ill treatment is systematic,". Uzbek human rights activists and relatives of prisoners confirmed these findings to the commission delegation.

Prisoner's relatives are also often denied access to the trials of their family members. Uzbek human rights activists told the commission delegation that even after the publication of the report on U.N. special rapporteur on torture, reliance on the use of torture in detention has not decreased, indeed one Uzbek human rights lawyer said the methods of torture have become more advanced.

Now the recent tragic events occurred as a result of public protest over the trial of 23 local businessmen who reportedly employed thousands of people in an impoverished region. The Uzbek Government claims that the charitable activities of these 23 businessmen are criminal and extremist and linked to H.T.

Given the nature of the Uzbek judicial system along with the Uzbek practice of convicting persons solely for their alleged membership in banned organizations, it is impossible to ascertain the veracity of such official claims. The commission joins those who are calling for an international investigation, possibly by the OSCE which has on the ground presence in Uzbekistan, to clarify the tragic course of events in Andijan.

Now I would like to highlight some of the policy recommendations made by the commission to the U.S. Government. And I would also like to request that the full set of the commission's recommendations in its 2005 annual report section on Uzbekistan be included in the record.

Mr. BROWNBACK. It will be in the record.

Mr. CROMARTIE. Thank you, Senator.

First, the U.S. Government should ensure that it speaks in a unified voice in its relations with the Uzbek Government. This has not always been the case. For example, last year the State Department refused to provide funding for the Uzbek Government due to its human rights violations. Yet, one month later, the Defense Department granted funds to the Uzbek Government.

U.S. statements and actions should be coordinated across agencies to ensure that U.S. concerns about human rights conditions in Uzbekistan are reflected in all dealings with the Uzbek Government.

Second, U.S. assistance to the Uzbek Government, with the exception of assistance to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, should be made contingent upon establishing and implementing a specific timetable for the government to take concrete actions to improve conditions of freedom of religion and observe international human rights standards.

Initial steps by the Uzbek Government should include ending reliance on convictions based solely on confessions; halting the detention and imprisonment of persons on account of their religious beliefs; establishing a mechanism to review the cases of persons previously detained under suspicion or charged with religious, political or security offenses; implementing the recommendations of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe Panel of Experts on Religion and Belief to revise the 1988 law on freedom of worship in religious organization to bring it in accordance with international standards; registering religious groups that comply with the legal requirements; and ensuring that every religious prisoner has access to his or her family, adequate medical care, and a lawyer, as specified in international human rights instruments.

Third, the U.S. Government should reinstate the Uzbek language radio broadcasts at Voice of America and should use VOA and other appropriate avenues of public diplomacy to explain to the people why religious freedom is an important element of U.S. foreign policy, as well as specific concerns about religious freedom in their country.

Fourth, the U.S. Government should advocate greater involvement of the OSCE center in Tashkent, including the collection of monitoring data on religious freedom and hiring a staff member in the OSCE center in Tashkent for monitoring these activities. The staff member should report to the OSCE tolerance unit in the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw.

And finally, the U.S. Government should urge the Uzbek Government to agree to a visit by U.N. special rapporteurs on freedom of religion of belief and the independence of the judiciary and provide the full and necessary conditions for such a visit.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Thank you very much, Dr. Cromartie. Appreciate your being here and appreciate your testimony.

I want to make a brief statement at this time and then we will continue with our witnesses, if we could. I apologize for being late. I've had a series of sessions today, and it's been a quite busy time on Capitol Hill.

This is a very serious time and it's a very serious issue regarding Uzbekistan. It's a country that I've dealt with over the years in various capacities from being on the Foreign Relations Committee and now Helsinki Commission Chairman. It is a country of vital and strategic interest to the United States.

It's a country coming out of the former Soviet Union that a number of us had great hope for and the kind of promise that over a period of years, with engagement from the United States, would liberalize economically, democratically, develop human rights. A number of us have pushed that agenda for some period of time.

I've traveled to the country myself. I've met with President Karimov previously, and I have urged liberalization.

Since 2001 and the initiation of the war on terrorism, Uzbekistan has been a key ally of the United States. We maintain a military base in that country that has been key for us, particularly in our prosecution of the war in Afghanistan and continued efforts.

But the economic and human rights and democratic liberalization that has been pushed by the West, particularly by the United States, has not been heeded by President Karimov or the Uzbek Government. And I think that's why we are where we are today.

If that had been pursued, if economic liberalization, human rights liberalization, democratic liberalization had been pursued, there would have been ways and means for people to legitimately express their viewpoints. That's not taken place and then you have this sort of situation that happens here today or that has happened here recently in Uzbekistan.

I do want to note that there are apparently a series of factual questions remaining to be investigated as to what actually took place and how it actually occurred.

Undoubtedly, and we do know, that there were a number of civilians who were killed by officials of the Uzbek Government. That did occur. It also appears that there was an armed assault on a government institution taking place by militants within Uzbekistan. That did occur as well.

Whatever specific provocations and the broader sources of frustration, it was not appropriate for a militant armed assault on a government institution and it was not appropriate for the government to respond the way they did.

I am very concerned and worried about how the government responded to this situation. And the attack on unarmed civilians is deeply disturbing. Even if armed groups had previously stormed a jail to release prisoners, possibly even including terrorists and even if the number of killed and wounded is far smaller than what had been reported by the media, it is a flagrant application of lethal force by the Uzbek Government. That's inappropriate, and it is wrong.

Along with the State Department I condemn the indiscriminate use of force against civilian populations in Uzbekistan.

But I think we come now to a moment of serious thought and reflection and opportunity. We got here because Uzbekistan has had too little democracy and economic opportunity and human rights. It is my opinion, and I believe a number of people in the legislative and executive branch and people around the world opinion believe that what needs

to take place now is for liberalization to occur, for human rights, for democracy, and for economic opportunity.

Instead, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, President Karimov of Uzbekistan has insisted on maintaining the tightest controls. The most basic freedoms are flouted. In Uzbekistan, no opposition parties have been registered since the early 1990s, a Soviet-era type of censorship of the media remains in place.

President Karimov has justified his policies by the need to crack down on Islamic radicals who want to topple his secular regime. It's true, of course, that Uzbekistan has faced and continues to face a genuine, albeit reduced threat from militant radicals. But I fear President Karimov's approach has produced the very outcome he wants to prevent.

We have many shared interests with Uzbekistan, especially cooperating against international terrorism. I have long counseled moderation in U.S. policy and called for realistic expectations, hoping for slow and steady progress. But we have not seen that take place.

If there's any hope to be found in what has recently happened, I believe that President Karimov and the government in Uzbekistan has a major opportunity here. I urge them to launch serious reforms to democratize the political system and liberalize the economy and provide for human rights for the citizens of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan stands at a crossroads, and time is of the essence. I believe it is not too late to take this opportunity and try to salvage the situation through liberalization, human rights, democracy, and economic reforms. I sincerely hope the Uzbek Government and President Karimov understand the stakes that are involved for his nation.

This briefing was intended to offer some concrete suggestions on how to proceed. I am appreciative of the witnesses putting forth their testimony. We cannot continue to see civilians shot and killed by the government in Uzbekistan. That is wrong.

But I think the way forward is the liberalization that many have pushed for some time, and that's something that we need to see take place.

I'd also call for an outside, exterior international investigation into the instances that have taken place in Uzbekistan over the past several weeks. This needs to be investigated by outside bodies, people outside of Uzbekistan, to get at the factual situation and to make a report not to the Uzbek Government, but to the world community, of what's taken place in that nation.

It's my hope that this hearing will help move that process forward of the investigation and also reforms within Uzbekistan.

There are several other witnesses to present here today. I'm going to have to be leaving myself in a little bit, but I do want to invite to testify now Dr. Martha Olcott, who has testified previously in front of this body, and I appreciate her thoughts. A Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, she's worked in the region of Central Asia for a number of years.

I don't know that any of us anticipated—I don't think anybody anticipated how things would unfold in Central Asia. I think everybody saw the factors building up in this region, but how those become expressed, I don't know if anybody saw that, although I do believe this situation was probably predictable, given the factors that have been developing in Uzbekistan.

Dr. Olcott, if you have particular thoughts on what we should be doing from this point on forward, I'd be most appreciative.

Ms. OLCOTT. Thank you very much. Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today, less than a month after my most recent visit to Uzbekistan, which included a trip to the Fergana Valley.

While many aspects of recent events in Uzbekistan remain unclear, one thing is perfectly obvious. Unless the government of President Islam Karimov moves quickly to introduce economic and political reforms, it will not regain public confidence. And if it fails to regain public confidence it will face an escalating series of political crises like the one it confronted in Andijan, with little reason to assume that the Uzbek Government will handle these better than it did the current one.

The Karimov regime shows no signs of outward remorse over how it handled last week's crisis and has given no indication that it will forsake an exclusively force-driven solution to future challenges.

Virtually all independent observers, though, concur that a strategy based exclusively on the use of force cannot secure its desired outcome—that of maintaining the government of Islam Karimov. And saying this does not diminish the moral implications of allowing such a strategy to be perpetuated, even if it was presumed to be able to succeed.

Recognizing that the continued use of force in Uzbekistan—in the absence of offering some economic relief and allowing basic political freedoms to its population—will create diminishing public order in Uzbekistan creates a different set of moral imperatives for the international community.

The recent actions in Uzbekistan create preconditions that require policy-makers to examine whether the rights of national sovereignty should be breached in the name of international responsibility to protect populations who are endangered and to restore their basic human rights.

As a result, it is incumbent upon the U.S. Government and the OSCE to be satisfied that they know what actually occurred in Andijan and its environs on May 12th, 13th, and 14th. This will not occur without the creation of an independent international commission under the auspices of the OSCE, the United Nations, or as an independent commission.

The Uzbek Government has offered its version of events, not once, but several times, and not only have their accounts been inconsistent, but they are seriously at odds with what has been reported by journalists who have interviewed refugees in Kyrgyzstan and interviewed witnesses in Uzbekistan—eyewitnesses.

As horrifying as some of these accounts are and as incompetent as the Uzbek Government has been in mounting its own defense, the international community has to make clear that it is looking for answers to what wanted and not for villains, answers that are necessary to provide the de-escalation of the tensions between the government and its population.

And in asking for answers, the international community must make clear that it is not prejudging outcomes, it is not prejudging the guilt or innocence of the 23 businessmen who stood accused of supporting an outlawed religious group, that it recognizes that force was used to seize arms stores and to take control of a prison, that it doesn't by definition preclude the version that siege takers from within the crowd fired on government troops.

Furthermore, there is no way that the Uzbek Government will be permitting an international inquiry until they are convinced that this will be done by neutral and unbi-

ased observers. And even then it is going to be a very hard sell, a point that I will return to in a couple of minutes.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers and their OSCE colleagues must continue to ensure that discourse about these events move from the question of international terrorism where the Uzbeks would like them to rest to the underlying causes of why so many people were drawn out to protest in the squares of Andijan on May 13th and 14th.

We cannot allow the issue of whether Hizb ut-Tahrir is a terrorist organization and whether it and splinter groups like Akhromiya should be placed on a list of international terrorist organizations to become a focus of current concern. The focus must remain on why the events in Andijan played out the way they did.

The U.S. administration has drawn attention to the fact that armed individuals broke into weapon stores, used weapons to forcibly release prisoners, and then set siege to public buildings. It is important to learn more about who these individuals were and to do so from independent sources as well as from the Government of Uzbekistan.

Knowing as much about the history of religious ferment in the Fergana Valley region as I do, it is hard for me personally to believe that the armed individuals who helped plan and carry out the attack on the weapon stores and prisons did not include at least a few individuals who passed through the network of terror training camps that initially began in Tajikistan and then moved to Afghanistan, where they enjoyed direct funding from Al Qaeda.

But the existence of such people—and there were prisoners in Andijan convicted for membership in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—and the reality of the threat that they may pose to the Government of Uzbekistan is but one of the questions before us.

The threat that armed individuals committed to the use of terror in the name of Islam may pose is magnified exponentially when the population they are appealing to has lost confidence in its government and lacks the means of expressing this in peaceful fashion.

This is one of the things that make the current Uzbek strategy so dangerous.

But at the same time, the international community must be aware of the security risks that will be created if the Karimov regime is ousted. There are two ways that this might come about, in my mind.

Karimov might be sacrificed, a la Nicolae Ceaucescu, by the heads of the very power ministries upon which his survival depends. This is unlikely, given the degree of rivalry that exists between these security services, but it is not impossible.

However, these men are no more likely to endorse an economic or political reform agenda than is the current president and may come to power through making alliances with local quasi-Islamist religious leaders.

More likely is the scenario where the government simply crumbles in the face of widening popular opposition which can no longer be contained through the use or the threat of force.

While Uzbekistan has the region's largest and best-equipped internal and external security forces, its capacity is limited and would not extend to squelching unrest in several cities simultaneously.

It could not contain a nationwide protest and might well splinter into competing armed groups, each backing up claims of competing regional elites, who might in turn be backed by competing clerics. The situation would be roughly analogous to what we saw

in Tajikistan in the early and mid-1990s. But those invoking Islamic themes might find easy access to far deadlier global networks.

Tragically, one thing is clear: There will not be the same smooth transfer of power that we saw in Uzbekistan that we saw in Georgia and Ukraine or even the bumpy Kyrgyz experience.

Among other things, there is no Saakashvili or Yushchenko waiting in the wings in Tashkent. While the secular democratic opposition in Uzbekistan includes many brave men and women, these people lack the political clout and the proven administrative skills of their Georgian and Ukrainian colleagues.

There are also members of the ruling elite found in most walks of Uzbek life who support reform but who have been frightened to speak up for fear of their jobs. But identifying them will be a difficult job. And more difficult will be to convince the small group of secular reformers and the long-time regime supporters to work together.

Rebuilding after regime collapse is difficult work, as we see in Afghanistan and Iraq, and requires close international engagement of the kind that has been lacking in Central Asia in the years since independence.

The consequences of state collapse in Uzbekistan are profound and would endanger the survival of the Kyrgyz and Tajik states and would change considerably the path of development in Kazakhstan.

Even today, the crisis is creating serious complications for the interim government in Kyrgyzstan. The Bishkek government must manage refugee flow and sort through requests of asylum seekers in a way that assures its own large Uzbek population of its fairness, while not antagonizing the government in Tashkent, or permitting individuals that are part of outlawed groups in Kyrgyzstan to inadvertently gain refuge.

In a situation in which the risk of chaos or civil war is rapidly moving from vague to impending, U.S. policymakers must find a way to translate noble pronouncements into action plans. But they cannot simply decide to abandon a sitting president without a plan of what they will do next and without making sure that the Uzbek President understands the door to chaos and civil war that he has opened.

An important first step is the formation of an international commission to investigate what occurred in Andijan. This is a project worthy of considerable back-door diplomacy to get Uzbek acquiescence through face-to-face contact with this man, with President Karimov, to warn him of what fate awaits him and his people if he does not change his policy.

Karimov will not be able to survive politically unless he engages in a whole range of economic and political reform. Some seemingly small changes in policy—freeing the purchase price of cotton and grain, introducing a flat tax system for income and profit, offering a staged withdrawal of trade restrictions—would all produce new strains of support for the currently beleaguered Uzbek President and substantially improve the lives of Uzbek citizens.

This is especially true if they were accompanied by the registration of foreign NGOs and the removal of restrictions on assembly, a new attitude toward open media, et cetera: all the things we've heard about today.

Some of these steps would create quick, but hopefully temporary, budget deficits, which, if the Uzbeks showed good faith with key political reforms, the international community could help Tashkent absorb.

But if the best offices of the United States, the OSCE and the United Nations and, of course, those of friendly European and Asian states are unable to convince the current Government of Uzbekistan that an independent inquiry into the events in Andijan is required, the international community must prepare itself to face a much greater humanitarian intervention in Uzbekistan and quite probably in the Central Asian region more generally.

Thank you.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Thank you.

Dr. Polat?

Mr. POLAT. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Commission, I am grateful for this given opportunity to make this speech here at the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

I am making my third presentation to the members of the Helsinki Commission here. Perhaps some people are bored to hear what I will say again.

On the positive side, I was thinking that this will be beneficial for Mr. Brownback—but he's already left—the Chairman of the Commission, to hear the voice of Uzbek opposition for the first time, as opposed to Congressman Christopher Smith, who has heard us few times already.

I say my presentations are boring because time and time again I make the same statements: President Karimov is a dictator. Democratic reforms are not taking place in Uzbekistan. Human rights are not respected in this country.

The first time I was here in 1999 after the Tashkent terrorist bombings, I said here that Uzbek authorities killed at that time two members of our party who had no relationship to terrorism. But what happened after the hearing? My friend, one of the leaders of Birlik Party, a former member of Uzbek Parliament, Shakhrukh Ruzimuradov, was killed.

And I spoke about it during the last hearing in June 2004. And what happened? Now, we are already hearing about mass killing in Uzbekistan.

And I'm a mathematician and I see some ties between our hearings and the behavior of Mr. Karimov.

There is an Uzbek proverb: [speaking in Uzbek.]

Here is my translation: If you say to a person that he is mad, he will be mad a little bit more.

So that's the same with Karimov. We say he is a dictator, we say he's authoritarian leader; he has become more dictator and more authoritarian. Maybe the roots of the problem is here in Washington.

So everything is going to become worse and worse. But there is another proverb, it's a Russian proverb: Not everything is bad as it seems; but in reality, it's even worse.

And I will give some examples why I think it's even worse. And the example is not from Uzbekistan or from United States.

Two months ago, Uzbek human rights activists conducted protests at the Tashkent office of the American Organization, Freedom House. Did you think this demonstration was organized to support the activities of this organization in Uzbekistan? No.

On the contrary, it was organized against its activities, which lately is attempting to validate activities of Karimov's regime and does not deal with defending human rights protection.

Can you imagine Freedom House, the symbol of human rights and freedom becomes a target for Uzbek human rights activists? What's going on? Maybe there are some roots in the United States [inaudible].

In another example, the Minister of Justice of Uzbekistan sent warnings recently to such organizations as National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, clearly telling them not to cooperate with unregistered opposition parties.

As a result, representatives of these organizations are even afraid to hold meetings with the members of Birlik Party at their office locations. And often they have meetings at barely visible chaykhanas, tea houses.

I think if the guys from this institute were a little bit smart, they can say: Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan, OK, we will help to register these political organization, political parties and cooperate with them little bit using [inaudible].

Therefore, I think it will not be coincidence if the Uzbek democrats start protesting near the American Embassy in Tashkent, because the United States remained as the only Western state that did not accuse the Uzbek authorities of the massacre of peaceful citizens in Andijan.

I am confident that the last events in Uzbekistan should be looked at in the context of the above-mentioned facts. And what had happened in Andijan may [inaudible].

Early morning on May 13, a group of unidentified armed people first attacked a military base, then a local prison and, finally, the Regional Administration Building. The Birlik Party issued statements on May 13 and May 15—it's very important—condemning these unlawful and forcible acts of this unidentified group. At the same time, we offered our help to the authorities to resolve this conflict, but no one was interested in our advice.

An armed group, after taking charge of the Regional Administration Building, has requested to free people who were sentenced by Uzbek courts heavy-handedly without following elementary rules of the justice system.

It is very important to note this is the exact demand put forward to the authorities by Uzbek and international human rights organizations. And very interesting that Islamic extremist groups are demanding the same as local and international human rights organizations.

And after this, several thousand demonstrators gathered around the building supporting demands of this group. Here, we can already make a first very important conclusion: Several teams of lightly armed people can easily take charge of the power in the city, one of the biggest cities of Uzbekistan. This indicates in regional locations the power of Karimov does not exist. Even police and the national security service are not willing to protect this regime.

At that stage, President Karimov, who is at the same time—this is important, too—commander-in-chief of the national army, swiftly arrives to Andijan and throws in the military to deal with the situation. Note that army should get involved in dealing with external danger and usually is not trained to deal with such peaceful events.

In doing so, Karimov completely dismissed the fact that there are several thousand peaceful civilians out there in addition to only tens of armed group. As a result, several hundred innocent citizens of the country were killed during the event.

Here we come to our second conclusion: the President of the country and the commander-in-chief of the nation's army steps into criminal act by forcing the army to perform activities which is not their responsibility in the first place.

And, finally, we have to remember the shooting down of hundreds of innocent peoples occurred in a country which is member of OSCE and strategic partner of United States.

So now we're thinking—we have to think, what to do next? And I'm not thinking about opposition, about the Birlik Party. We are doing something and we will do it—we are doing things for the last 15 years.

But I want to say about what we are waiting from international community, from OSCE and United States. I think it necessary to do the following: an OSCE commission should be established to investigate Andijan tragedy. If OSCE will not do it, I think OSCE will be dead already.

Second, United States should condemn the shooting of peaceful demonstration in Andijan as did it other West countries. Maybe I didn't understand well Mr. Brownback. He said that United States condemned it. I think it's not true because United States never condemned it. They only expressed some concern about this event—

Mr. McNAMARA. Just to make a point on that. Definitely, there have been statements issued by the administration condemning the indiscriminate use of force against the population.

Mr. POLAT. OK. And next, OSCE and United States should require the Government of Uzbekistan to start democratic reforms. In particular, registration of the opposition parties. And in the first place, Birlik Party since it is the most prepared party amongst others. The requirement should be made now without waiting OSCE Commission results.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan should take steps to conduct constitutional reforms where a single chamber parliament will be set up with the participation of opposition, limiting powers of the president.

I am aware of the fact that Western countries are worried that weak opposition and attempts of change the current setup of the governance in the country will result in destabilization and enhancing power for Islamic extremists.

I completely disagree with this position. Not wasting too much time on this subject, let me point out that, first, it is impossible to set up atheistic state in Uzbekistan which is what Karimov has attempted to do so far. And second, Uzbekistan will have a religious model over time, very similar to Turkish system. High secular educational level of population in the country gives enough optimism to hope that this will be the case.

The people who say that power maybe will catch by Islamic fundamentalists in Uzbekistan, they're only thinking about Uzbekistan very close to Afghanistan and very similar country .

It is impossible. Uzbekistan is already for about 150 years, almost a European-style country under Russian control.

Let me take last few points about opposition, in my last minutes. At this point in time, Birlik is the most prepared democratic opposition in the country. Everybody knows that authorities have been trying to destroy us over the last 15 years. It's very important. For 15 years, Karimov has tried to destroy us. But he cannot.

Most similar national opposition movements around Commonwealth of Independent States, which were set up at the time of Gorbachev era, have disappeared. But Birlik is still functioning. It's very important. We have over 20,000 registered members. Over the

past 2 years, the Minister of Justice strictly followed Karimov's orders and refused Birlik to register five times. You can imagine—that we cannot prepare the papers for registered political parties. It is very easy but they don't want it. But party is existing and we have 20,000 registered members of Birlik. But both OSCE and United States are keeping silent about this tough violence against political rights of people of Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, I believe Birlik is in a position to resolve any political problems. It is true that we may not have enough capabilities to work in executive bodies, but we know that many people who are working in the executive bodies under Karimov's regime are not supporters of this regime and they are ready to work with us. And they will work with us.

In conclusion, I would like to say the following: Andijan tragedy has showed a real weakness of Karimov's regime. It will not last long. We have to be prepared—I mean we, Birlik—for the change of power, and we are getting ready.

Many thanks for your attention.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Mr. Kimmage?

Mr. KIMMAGE. Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity. I prepared a written statement and I ask that it be entered into the record. And the views that I express here today are my own.

The events that took place on and after May 13 in Andijan, Uzbekistan, have drawn the attention of the entire world and prompted the U.S. State Department to say that there needs to be an open and credible transparent inquiry into this and that the international community would stand ready to assist.

In the hope that such an investigation will take place, I would like here to summarize some of what we know about what happened in Andijan and put forward a number of concrete recommendations for lines of inquiry.

On closer examination, the bloodshed in Uzbekistan breaks down, into two events that raise two separate groups of issues.

The first is an attack by armed militants on the night of May 12 on a military garrison and prison, freeing of prisoners and the seizure of the Regional Administration Building in Andijan.

The second is the use of deadly force on May 13 against unarmed demonstrators in Andijan.

President Islam Karimov and his government have presented official explanations for both events. But independent reports cast the first event in a different light and paint a radically different picture of the second.

I will briefly speak about both of these questions now.

On the assault, the basic details are relatively clear that on the night of May 12, a group of armed men attacked a police unit, military garrison and prison. They freed several hundred prisoners and then went on to seize the Regional Administration Building in Andijan.

President Karimov has described them as religious extremists whose goal was to set up a caliphate in Uzbekistan which he said would have then gone to include Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and all other countries.

He has also linked the attackers to Hizb ut-Tahrir, which we heard Commissioner Cromartie speak about earlier. Independent reports do not refute Karimov's statement that these attackers resorted to violence. But they provide little support for his other assertions. And as Commissioner Cromartie noted, this is a crucial in Uzbekistan with issues of militant ties.

As the State Department has documented, there is ample evidence of rights violations and unfair trials and it is very difficult to know exactly what connections to militant groups may exist.

What I would say is that at present, the evidence we have does not allow us to conclude that these were or were not extremists. Rather, it shows that there are ample grounds to doubt the official Uzbek claim.

Thus far, none of the independent accounts we have of the events in Andijan indicates that the armed men on the anti-government side employed extremist rhetoric or symbolism.

On the second count, which is the use of deadly force against armed civilians. The Uzbek official version is that the rebels who are responsible for the violence, which they say killed 169 people, 32 members of government forces, five women and children, and the remaining dead would then be either armed terrorists or their hostages. President Karimov has stressed that no one gave any orders to shoot.

Independent accounts contrast this. In addition to my statement, I've prepared a list of media accounts, of reported eyewitness statements which you could find on the table.

I will quote one eyewitness statement from a reporter for the Institute for War and Peace reporting who was in Andijan who said that, "armored personnel carriers appeared out of nowhere, moving through the streets at speed. A second column arriving 5 minutes later suddenly opened up on the crowds, firing off round after round without even slowing down to take aim."

There are even more disturbing eyewitness accounts of troops moving through the crowds and killing wounded protesters.

The independent death toll—and this is all unconfirmed, I have to say—stands at 745.

Given this, an inquiry should proceed along two groups of issues: The first, as I said, is the attack by armed militants.

The questions we need to ask are: Who were the armed men who attacked a military garrison and prison? Did they have any ties supported by hard evidence to an extremist organization? What were their ultimate aims? How many inmates did they release from prison? Are there reasonable grounds for believing that any of those inmates were members of extremist or terrorist organizations?

What are the current whereabouts of the inmates who were released? Did negotiations take place between the government and the rebels? And if so, what was their substance and outcome?

On the second group of issues involving the use of deadly force: Who started the violence in the center of Andijan on the center of May 13? Did Uzbek troops fire on unarmed civilians? If so, were they acting under orders? If so, who gave those orders? Finally, how many people were killed, and under what circumstances?

The precise format of a future investigation can only emerge through cooperation between the Uzbek Government and the international community. One possible vehicle, as has been suggested today, is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Finally, I would like to say one remark about the refugee situation. There are over 500 Uzbek refugees now in Kyrgyzstan, many of them from Andijan. They've been accorded asylum secret status but President Karimov has said that he does not consider them refugees. And some Kyrgyz officials have said that they can't stay.

Kyrgyz NGOs have warned that they could face torture or other reprisals if they're returned to Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan recently experienced significant political upheaval and they could thus be especially vulnerable to pressure from its larger and more powerful neighbor. In order to forestall this potential pressure on the Kyrgyz Government and safeguard the wellbeing of the refugees, the operation and management of the camp where they are housed should be transferred with the consent of the Kyrgyz Government, to the United Nations or Red Cross. And international organizations should also take responsibility for the admission of new refugees from Uzbekistan.

In conclusion, I would say that the tragic events in Andijan have left many questions unanswered. But the information available is sufficient to justify a concerted search for answers. What I hope to have done here is to underscore the pressing need for the "credible and transparent accounting" that the State Department has urged, as well as to suggest some of the lines along which it might be conducted.

Thank you.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Excuse me. Before we proceed with questions, I would point out just perhaps a historical note. And that is that President Karimov is certainly no stranger to the OSCE. Indeed, the president himself signed the original Helsinki Final Act document in 1992 when his country joined the OSCE accepting all the commitments relating to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

So we have a signature, if you will, on paper.

Before opening up to questions from the audience, there were a few questions that came to my mind. One has the impression that the regime has been quite effective in eliminating alternative voices in Uzbek society. Even if President Karimov were open to dialogue, which is certainly an outstanding question, are there meaningful interlocutors for him to engage with?

Who would like to address that question?

Ms. OLCOTT. I'll start then. I think myself, and Abdurahim said that he believed that Birlik would have strong support in the executive branch and, in fact, the Senate. And I think that's really a very critical point.

I think if we talk about potential interlocutors, one of things that if anybody could get President Karimov to begin political reform, you would find this that a very large part of the Uzbek ruling—I mean, not the top top, but even very close to the top—include individuals in every different walk of life, in the judiciary and some of the new parliamentarians, members of the economic ministries, even in the military, there are people that really do want to see meaningful economic and political reform.

So I think if you are really creative at changing the political environment in the country where the existence of independent groups made it easier for independent groups even to speak their mind, then I think that you would find that interlocutors do develop.

Interlocutors can't appear overnight but Uzbekistan is more than capable of producing interlocutors. Also, I think there's been a lot said about religious life in Uzbekistan.

As somebody who has been studying Uzbek religion intimately for the past 4 years and non-intimately for the last 30, I mean, I think that there's a lot more fluidity in Islam in Uzbekistan than we see—that the state's attitude is much more—it's changed in the last few years, creating a real alternative within Islam for people to be debating what the nature of their own religious life is.

Here, it's really focused on these religious groupings that are illegal. But there is a dynamism in Uzbek Islam which is critical, I think, for Uzbekistan to develop a civic society because Uzbekistan has been under Russian rule for 150 years. But it's also been an Islamic country for 1,500 years—I'm probably not doing the math right—about 1,400 years. And this part of its heritage has to be brought back on the table if civic life is to have any meaning.

Mr. MCNAMARA. And just picking up on that last point, and certainly, others are welcome to chime in as well. One has a sense, though, and correct me if I'm wrong, that the regime has also vilified all Muslims operating outside of sort of the structures of state control. That's the impression that one gets.

Ms. OLCOTT. I think that impression has—I mean, I think the situation is really changing and I'm not always sure how close to the very top people are aware of how it's changing.

And so early this year, Uzbek Government introduced an experimental program—it's the second year it's pursued this—of teaching history of religion in state schools. And next year it's going to become nationwide. I interviewed people on my most trip involved in that program. And it's really under the guise of history of religion. There's an awful lot of propagation of the faith. I saw the books being used. I mean, it's not just text being written by atheists in the state. This is really a form of almost what used to exist in some European countries of state religion being taught in state schools.

So I think there's this—a much more fluid religious life under the banner of state-sponsored Islam. And that's increased. There have been legal changes. The 1998 law is still there. And I'm not making excuses for the way it's implemented. But from 2000 on, there have been changes in the way the official Islamic community is able to carry on its activities which has really created a great deal more space for independent religious actors. And that's very different from saying “organized religious actors” but independent religious actors.

I mean, I just see a much more vibrant religious life there than is often reported in the pages of Western publications. I'm not talking about those that monitor this for a living.

That doesn't mean that the abuses that the Commission reports or are that covered in the Western press do not exist. I mean, individuals may have their rights abused but at the same time, you can also have a vibrant religious life developing. And I see both realities in Uzbekistan.

Which is why so many of the actions of the regime seem to me so troubling because I do see, as Abdurahim was implying, there are exit strategies available out of this current situation that would produce a better life for everybody in Uzbekistan if somehow the people at the top could be made to understand this.

Mr. McNAMARA. Anyone else? [inaudible]

Mr. POLAT. I'm sorry for my bad English. Maybe I speak not bad but my understanding is absolutely worse. Because I'm in the United States 7 years, but I'm saying staying—not living. I'm not living here. It's true. I'm living in Uzbekistan. But now you can do it because of the Internet, the telephone. That's why my English is very bad. That's why I'm not sure I understand what has been said.

But I will say something about role of religious or in our country. Even under the Soviet Union, it was officially an atheistic country. But even the everybody felt themselves as Muslim. And very important is that country was secular country and religions were separated from politics. That's very important.

But Karimov tried to continue these policies. It's impossible. And I think, in general, Uzbekistan will take place in this specter of distribution between secular and religious countries. It will be something between Pakistan and Turkey. Of course, we will try to—it should be close to Turkey where I lived before the United States, 6 years in Turkey. That's why I have good experience about Turkey. And actually, Uzbekistan should be Turkey.

Maybe I will say very tough things but I have to say it. For example, if Mr. Karimov sometimes will visit mosque, the situation will change by 60 degrees. Because you said 90 percent of the population are Muslims and the president is atheist. For 15 years, one time he visited mosque when he was at Saudi Arabia.

It is impossible. But in other case, I know some people are worrying that it will pick up power Islam fundamentalists. It is impossible that in all this—the population is not supporting fundamentalism. They're Muslims. I'm Muslim. But now under the pressure of the Karimov regime, they are becoming maybe not more powerful. No. It is small groups but they are becoming more active, maybe.

That's why I told you if Mr. Karimov and some representatives of Uzbek Embassy here will go time from time as I am doing, and I see it in Turkey—of course, now the power in Turkey is almost religious party but before there was a was secular president, prime ministers.

They are visiting mosques and the people saw it is the same Muslim as they are. That's why it should be changed in Uzbekistan something cardinaly. It's in big degree.

And second about opposition. And I'm not saying this only because I'm Birlik Party leader. I'm saying it to promote understanding responsibly of what I'm saying.

Many peoples know about Uzbekistan and Uzbekistan's opposition's activity from Russian media. It's a fact. But nobody—very few people even in United States knows the real situation with opposition.

Birlik is a real power in Uzbekistan. Everybody knows who is Karimov—and Karimov, for 15 years, tried to destroy it but he couldn't. And he cannot do it. Never. Because it's a very strong organization, with about 20,000 registered members of party in the country. They've gone totalitarian. It's not a dictatorship. It's a totalitarian country, Uzbekistan. Here we have 20,000 registered members, not peoples who are saying 20,100 registered party.

It's very important and I'm sure it will take power—

Mr. MCNAMARA. Thank you very much for your comments.

Mr. POLAT [continuing]. Through the secular regime but it will be role of religious Muslim, of course, will be improved or increased. I don't know how much person, but it should be increased.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Mr. CROMARTIE. Just quickly.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Sure. Go ahead.

Mr. CROMARTIE. Your question was who are the potential interlocutors for engagement? We shouldn't, of course, forget the former Chief Mufti Mohammed Saadiq Saadiq who is in Tashkent now and he's returned from exile, voluntary exile. He met with our commission. He's a scholar who has published a lot on Islam and human rights. He's certainly a [inaudible] partner.

Mr. MCNAMARA. As I said earlier, we're now open to questions from the audience. If there's a representative from the Embassy of Uzbekistan who would like to pose the first question, certainly, I'm very pleased to allow that to happen.

Again, we would ask that you ask questions and avoid making statements. And please, if you could indicate your name and the affiliation that you have and utilize the microphone because that will be part of the transcription and unofficial record of today's briefing.

So I open to the floor. So it's your time.

QUESTIONER. Thank you. My name is Erika Schlager and I'm with the staff of the Helsinki Commission. I think my question might principally be directed to Dr. Olcott, although others may wish to comment as well.

The United States has certainly counseled Uzbekistan to undertake political and economic human rights democratic reform. And particular concern has been raised here about ongoing problems such as torture and abuse in Uzbekistan.

At the same time, it's been widely reported that the United States is rendering detainees to Uzbekistan. And I'm wondering if you think that might send a mixed message or suggest that we're not as serious about our concerns regarding torture as we really are. Thank you.

Ms. OLCOTT. I think that the question is really complicated. I honestly don't think—I think this is much more an issue for the way the United States is perceived outside of Uzbekistan and the way the United States is perceived inside of Uzbekistan.

I think that there is very little awareness about the United States having sent prisoners—the accusations that were made, I think, initially by former [UK] Ambassador Craig Murray was the one who started this whole campaign.

I've made several trips to Uzbekistan since that first emerged as an issue. And I actually had heard more about some of the way Ambassador Murray—some of the things associated with his public statements there than I did about the torture issue.

I do think it has colored how the United States is perceived elsewhere because of sending people there. But I think you're really talking about a small group of human rights activists within Uzbekistan who would even know of the issue and be bothered by the double standard.

I think more seriously, and I'm not diminishing the importance of this issue, I think the United States, which was very vivid to Uzbekistan in 2001 at the time of the war in Afghanistan and when the base first opened, has become more and more remote for the Uzbeks over the past few years.

I think it's really important to note that when—apparently—I mean, this was reported everywhere and they got somebody to put their declaration on the Web—that when these people took—the hostage takers took hostages, they sent a message in Russian to Vladimir Putin to intervene in their behalf.

They did not write to the United States. They did not appeal to the United States. And if you want to turn to, I mean, Russia's record on some of these issues is well more problematic than ours, but this was a more vivid personage to these people than we were. That's something that as an American, not to mention a policy activist, as well as analyst, is something that deeply disturbs me—that America is being eclipsed in this part of the world by states that are much less visible as defenders as democratic values. I mean, you know, I think that's really the much bigger tragedy.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Any other questions?

QUESTIONER. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

I want to take an opportunity to make a short 1-minute statement if you permit, and it relates to your original question about the interlocutors.

Mr. MCNAMARA. If you can sort of pose it as a question, that would be very helpful, or if not, please make it as brief as possible.

QUESTIONER. Make it quick and short.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Atabek Nazirov, and I'm the chairman of the Global Uzbek Council. It's a diversified group of professionals from Uzbekistan who mostly work and live abroad.

But first of all, let me on behalf of the founders and fellows of the Uzbek Global Council, to express sorrow and deepest condolences to the friends and families of the people who lost their relatives and loved ones during the tragic events that took place past week in Uzbekistan.

Unfortunately, nothing will ever replace the loss of these human souls.

Now, dear audience and panel, allow me to take this unique opportunity to publicly introduce our group, established as a de facto organization last year in London.

Since our inception, we have expanded our membership to include fellows in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, Moscow, and, of course, Uzbekistan.

Over the last couple of months, we've been in the process of formalizing the existence of our organization and registering it as a nonprofit entity in the United States.

Our objective has been to effectively utilize a diverse pool of human capital available within our group for the benefit of Uzbek society, and more importantly now for the stability in Uzbekistan.

We're planning on sponsoring various educational research initiatives, facilitating networking and development opportunities, and also promoting charitable work, all of which in the long run would contribute, we hope, to the improvement of the socioeconomic environment of Uzbekistan and to the challenging process of democratization.

Given the current situation in Uzbekistan, I would like to inform the audience and the public that the members of the Global Uzbek Council are eager to become actively

engaged in helping to fund and implement solutions that will bring Uzbekistan out of this crisis.

I'll be available after the briefing to provide any information or details to the audience if necessary.

Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Thank you for keeping it short.

And again, there is material available, and if you have materials outside, people can avail themselves of those items.

Don't be shy, please. I see a representative of the media, which are usually not shy.

QUESTIONER. Yes, the media.

Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Liberty. Asta Banionis.

If anyone on the commission—the religion commission—could possibly think back to another situation where violence has been used against civilians to? From that experience, what is the next step?

You've all spoken and recommended investigations to go forward and independent investigations to go forward. How likely is that? What methodology would you use under the trigger of the CSCE [Helsinki] documents to try to implement that?

Mr. CROMARTIE. Wait. Let me ask you, is the question what—after violence against civilians, what kind of pressure can be applied to—

QUESTIONER [Ms. Banionis]. [Off-mike.] the investigation—

[Crosstalk.]

Mr. CROMARTIE. Right, I mean—

QUESTIONER [Ms. Banionis]. [Off-mike.]

Mr. CROMARTIE. Well, let me just say that as with anywhere else, I would—Dr. Olcott would know the answer to that better I think than anyone. Well, maybe the chair would like to answer that one.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Sure.

Just my observation on that. In fact, there is an impression that the Government of Uzbekistan is open to a truly independent investigation of the circumstances surrounding developments, especially in the eastern part of the country, of late.

That said, certainly the representative of the OSCE is Foreign Minister Rupel, and before one could undertake a meaningful investigation, they would first obviously have to be some direct communications. And it's my impression that even establishing the most fundamental contact has been difficult, if not impossible.

So, again, there are certain steps that would need to be taken. That said, there has been a willingness on the part of the government—in the past, I can recall at least one circumstance of allegations that an individual had been tortured to death while in detention, where the government did show a willingness to have independent forensic experts visit the country and to try to do some kind of an assessment very much after the fact.

Ms. OLCOTT. Could I be blunt, but subtle on the record?

I mean, one of the problems is that he is the leader of a sovereign state. And I would—the parallel that I thought about—I mean, you're asking a question.

Of course, there is Russia and Chechnya. You know, that's a dispute in which there has been violence, force used against unarmed civilians to the best of all our knowledge, and the international community has tried to come in and been rebuffed.

I mean, President Karimov has given very, very mixed signals. He's talked about wanting some investigation, but he doesn't want to be publicly slapped, and that's I think part of the problem, that you are—he doesn't have the international position of somebody like the leader of Russia, that they can unilaterally say no.

But the whole question, I think, is really one of what is the proper approach to get a leader, and that's very difficult. There is no easy formula. But that was why I alluded to the need for backdoor diplomacy.

It's not simply a question of what the rules of international engagement require. Oftentimes, fulfilling those rules is a final stage and you get people to ask for things they don't really want in order to not be put in the record publicly against it.

In my mind, the key is to find a way—for international interlocutors to find a way to convince this very proud and stubborn man who is not seeing things in the way that many of us are seeing them—you know, doesn't share the same view of what the reality of the next stage in his country is that many of us do to accept. And that's very problematic unless it is done at the highest levels and in private, and that's one of the problems.

And you know sometimes that it's been done, because it succeeded. [Laughter.]

Mr. McNAMARA. Well, again, I would just repeat that as a logical first step, there would have to be some direct communication at the highest levels. And as I understand it, even that first step has not occurred unfortunately.

QUESTIONER. Margarita Assenova, Freedom House. I would like to make one short remark and pose one question.

The remark is in response to Mr. Polat when he said that Freedom House was opposed in Tashkent for trying to open channels of communication with the government. I would like to say the investigations—there were three independent investigations of suspicious deaths in custody. They were facilitated by Freedom House with the participation of international experts. The second one was with local human rights defenders. And the third one was a combination, international experts and local human rights defenders. And we can see that this is a good sign of opening of communication with the government officials in order to prevent cases of abuse and torture.

So Freedom House has rated Uzbekistan as a not-free country in all its publications. It's one of the worst regimes in the world. It's also in the publications of Freedom House, it's very difficult to accuse Freedom House of washing the bloody face of Karimov, as some human rights defenders pointed, because the fact of the matter is the truth is set, but there has to be a constructive approach to addressing grave human rights problems when one is dealing with a country with lack of practices, lack of understanding of human rights standards, and there is a lot of need for education and for mentality change to make this work.

The question I would like to ask is, I have insights about this, but it's important for the audience to hear. Are there reformers in this government? How homogeneous the government is? And what would be the future of a—what would be a future succession option for Uzbekistan, sooner or later?

This moment is really critical, and everyone regrets these tragic events took place, but for the sake of Uzbekistan and for the sake of peace in the region, there has to be some alternative of succession that would benefit both Uzbekistan and the entire region.

Maybe Martha or Daniel could answer the question. Thank you.

Mr. KIMMAGE. I'll go first, because it's very short.

I don't think this is the right forum to publicly speculate on who a successor to President Karimov would be.

Ms. OLCOTT. I would like to take a slightly—take the same answer, but twist it back to the—what our topic is today.

I think that's one of the reasons why this hearing and this crisis is really so critical.

I don't see the prospect of—I think it's in a sense if there's not an opening of Uzbek society quickly, it's pretty irrelevant who the successor is going to be.

The key is the opening to proceed the succession struggle, and the whole nature of that what that struggle is going to be is going to play out very differently if there is any stability in the country itself, because as I alluded to in my testimony, contenders for power regardless of who they are today and how they may change in the next six months or a year or two years are going to take advantage of this to expand their own power base.

And that's why I think there is no tomorrow for opening prospects for political reform. But the only way you're going to get people off the street is if you have economic reform.

And so I think that it's really—I mean, you want political reform for reasons other than just blowing off steam. But right now political reform in the absence of economic reform will blow off steam for today or tomorrow, but it's going to lead to even more demands for economic change.

In this case, they must come hand in hand. And today is too late, but tomorrow is really too late.

Mr. MCNAMARA. A quick question, because corruption hasn't really come up as an issue, per se, but certainly the corrosive nature of that—I wonder if you could touch briefly on that.

Ms. OLCOTT. I think that the corruption issue is really critical to the difficulty in our response to what's going on. Even understanding it in 5 to 7 minutes would be difficult, even if we all got 10 minutes it's hard.

One of the reasons that the case of the businessman was so troubling is that both versions of reality are plausible to me, again, as somebody working in these—with these—with the development of Islam in the Fergana region. The existence of—and Dan knows way more about Akramia than I do—but the existence of the way Akramia exists is around enterprises. And they use these enterprises to fund their activities. And Akramia was based in Andijan.

So the charge that these businessmen, in addition to employing 2,000 people, or whatever number of people, were giving money to an Islamic charity that had as its goal creating a caliphate. Whether through armed use or not, you know, I at this point certainly can't say. It's plausible.

This is the model that the United States is investigating throughout the world, you know, the use of Islamic charities to transfer funds to other kinds of groups. So it's a plausible claim.

But equally plausible is the claim that there were people in the local administration that wanted to buy the enterprises of some of these people at below market price and that they went to jail because of that.

Both realities exist in Uzbekistan, and it's impossible to know sitting here or even sitting in Tashkent, and possibly even sitting in Andijan, which version is true unless you can get somebody who can document in your presence the takeover. Until that takeover bid succeeds, you usually never learn about it.

But both realities are part of Uzbekistan. Corruption has been a serious problem, and anytime you open up the prospects of making money, of expanding the private sector, the corruption escalates.

The government has had some ineffectual and very slow economic reform in recent years, and there is a slight improvement in the private sector in Uzbekistan over the past two years, especially over the past 18 months or so, which is why some of the changes I propose would really have a rapid effect on de-escalating some of the economic tensions.

But anytime you do that, corruption increases as a factor, and you can't go two steps in Uzbekistan without people beginning to complain about corruption. It is something that the Uzbeks are no longer frightened to discuss. This is—and that's going to continue. You know, this is really an issue that really disturbs everybody deeply.

But you can't begin to cope with corruption issues unless you open economic opportunity and build a constituency of your interlocutors, in a sense, who are going to push within the regime and against the regime from outside for economic protection.

Economic protection of private businesses is the biggest problem I see in post-Soviet space. It's not simply an Uzbek phenomenon. And the only thing that exerts pressure on it is the existence of a local class that feels like it's going to disappear .

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Mr. POLAT. [Off-mike.]

Mr. McNAMARA. Sure. A brief comment, sure.

Mr. POLAT. [Off-mike.] understand almost anything, but I will try to say something.

About the political and economic reforms, I read in many articles in United States, in Internet, Web sites, about important economic reforms. But I think some people—they give the examples of Pinochet in Chile, he did economic reforms without political reforms, example of Indonesia. But they didn't understand one thing, that this is a quite different situation. I don't know how the people—they compare about it, because big problem in Uzbekistan, for all former Soviet Union countries, is reprivatization. There was not problem with reprivatization in Chile, Indonesia, in anywhere.

And so without political reforms, it is impossible to have any economic reform in Uzbekistan. And now you see it—Yeltsin—now everybody is blaming him, but he began political reform and as a result of his reform is now they have something in economic, Russia.

The same in Kazakhstan. They have political reform, that's why they have economic reform.

And look, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan—they have no economic, political reform. As a result, they don't really have any economic reforms. So that's why Karimov cannot do anything in economic without changing the political system.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you.

If there are no further questions, then I will close the briefing, reminding you that a transcription of today's proceedings will be available on the Commission's Web site at www.csce.gov.

Thank you for attending this afternoon's briefing.

[Whereupon the briefing ended at 3:15 p.m.]



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