

Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Submitted by
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Journalists imprisoned in Central Asia

Chairmen Smith and Cardin, members of the commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important hearing on political prisoners in Central Asia. My name is Muzaffar Suleymanov, and I am the research associate for the Europe and Central Asia program at the Committee to Protect Journalists, an international, independently funded organization that defends press freedom worldwide. It is an honor to speak to you today.

I will focus my testimony on journalists currently imprisoned in retaliation for their work in two of the region's countries, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Before I discuss CPJ's concerns about these countries, I would like to commend U.S. President Barack Obama for endorsing the fight for press freedom in the statement on May 3, World Press Freedom Day.

As Obama noted, societies worldwide begin to suffer when self-censorship—spurred by, among other threats, the fear of retaliatory imprisonment—becomes the guiding principle in local newsrooms or blogger's apartments. As guarantors of human rights and freedoms, world leaders must hold Central Asian regimes responsible for denying global access to information by throwing critical reporters behind bars. "A culture of impunity for such actions must not be allowed to persist in any country," Obama said. We fully support this call and urge immediate action toward the repressive regimes in Central Asia.

Despite their constitutional mandate to guarantee freedom of the press, regional governments have either sanctioned repression of the media, or been directly responsible for it. In the past decade, President Islam Karimov's authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan firmly cemented its name as one of the worst jailer of journalists in Europe and Central Asia. At least five independent journalists remain in Uzbek prisons—in fact, until last November, Karimov's own nephew [languished](#) in a psychiatric ward, put there in retaliation for his critical reporting. And authorities in Kyrgyzstan, where leaders have [publicly declared](#) their commitment to human rights and the rule of law, shamelessly imprisoned investigative journalist Azimjon Askarov for life. It is the only country in the region where authorities have handed a life sentence to a critic.

Although no other governments in the region have such a high record of imprisoned journalists, all of them are infamous for their anti-press policies.

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

In June 2006, Turkmen authorities [arrested](#) Ogulsapar Muradova, a local correspondent for the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and [sentenced](#) her to six years in prison in August. She mysteriously [died in jail](#) a month later. [Urinboy Usmonov](#), a BBC World Service correspondent, was one of two independent journalists imprisoned in Tajikistan in 2011 in direct connection to their work. [Igor Vinyavsky](#), whose newspaper criticized a violent police crackdown on protesting oil workers in western Kazakhstan, spent two months in prison earlier this year on spurious extremism and anti-state charges. These cases, and others, illustrate the continuing threats that critical journalists face, which has gradually led to their use of self-censorship as a defense mechanism.

I shall now focus on the press freedom records of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan ranks sixth on CPJ's 2012 [list](#) of the world's top 10 censors of the press. Indeed, the country has long been in CPJ's [spotlight](#). The crackdown on critical journalists and media outlets peaked in the aftermath of the [May 2005 massacre](#) in the eastern city of Andijan, and resulted in the de facto eradication of the independent press in the country. Since then, authorities have [banned](#) reporting without accreditation and [harassed](#) the few remaining independent journalists; [prosecuted](#) journalists on defamation and ambiguous "insulting the nation" charges; and [denied entry](#) to foreign correspondents. Domestic access to critical news websites [remains blocked](#) and foreign broadcasts are also jammed, CPJ research shows.

But it is the [imprisonment of journalists](#) on fabricated criminal charges that secured Uzbekistan's spot among the world's leading enemies of the press.

In 1999, Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov, journalists for the opposition newspaper *Erk*, were convicted on fabricated anti-state charges and sentenced to 14 and 15 years in prison, respectively. Both reporters have spent more time in jail than any other journalist worldwide, according to CPJ research. Earlier this year, authorities handed Bekjanov another five-year [prison](#) term just days before he was to be released. In addition, the government has not disclosed the health, condition, or status of Ruzimuradov. CPJ's letter to the Embassy of Uzbekistan, sent last November, remains unanswered.

Two other journalists were given hefty prison terms following ostensibly marred prosecutions. Salidzhon Abdurakhmanov, a contributor to the exile-run independent outlet *Uznews*, was [sentenced](#) to 10 years in jail in 2008 after being charged with “drug possession for personal use.” Abdurakhmanov was [arrested](#) after his car was searched by police who said they found marijuana and opium in the trunk. Although lab results showed that the journalist had [no traces](#) of narcotics in his blood, and investigators were unable to establish chain of custody or find his fingerprints on the package, authorities jailed him after amending his charges. Abdurakhmanov was being tried and sentenced at the same time that Uzbek officials were persuading the European Union to lift its sanctions—imposed directly after the Andijan massacre—by arguing their commitment to human rights and press freedom.

In 2009, authorities sentenced Dilmurod Saiid, an independent journalist from Tashkent, to [12 and a half years in jail](#) on fabricated charges of extortion and forgery. Following a tainted probe and trial—during which prosecution witnesses openly told the court they were being forced to testify against the journalist—authorities convicted Saiid and sentenced him to jail without his lawyer, family, or the press present. Nine months after [his arrest](#), Saiid’s wife and daughter died in a car accident while traveling to the prison to visit him. His appeals were denied.

Press freedom groups, [including CPJ](#), have repeatedly called on Karimov to ease his regime’s grip on the media and to release all of the imprisoned journalists. But the Uzbek government remains defiant.

Most recently, authorities prosecuted independent journalists Viktor Krymzalov and Yelena Bondar on defamation charges. According to [news reports](#), the journalists were tried in connection to articles they neither contributed to nor wrote. Despite the absurdity of the charges and a lack of any implicating evidence, state-controlled courts sided with the prosecution and handed each reporter exorbitant fines. Krymzalov and Bondar were spared prison terms, but their sentencing clarifies the unofficial message from the Uzbek authorities: Journalism leads to jail.

KYRGYZSTAN

Unlike its neighbor, Kyrgyzstan was not mentioned on CPJ’s prison census for the decade that our organization has compiled prison lists. In 2010, however, amid a violent ethnic conflict that deeply scarred southern Kyrgyzstan, regional authorities handed a life term to one of their fiercest critics, journalist and human rights activist [Azimjon Askarov](#).

Askarov’s case depicts official retaliation against an investigative reporter who meticulously documented and exposed human rights abuses by law enforcement agencies. Askarov had

reported on the fabrication of criminal cases, and the rape, torture, and murder of detainees by police in the southern Jalal-Abad region. Interviewed by CPJ through his lawyer, the journalist said that he had also witnessed police officers shooting and killing unarmed civilians during the 2010 ethnic conflict. He said he had shared his findings with regional and international news outlets and human rights groups, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Moscow-based group Memorial.

Askarov's case was marred with numerous procedural violations. Although he was [arrested on June 15, 2010](#), police did not document his detention until the next day and denied him access to his lawyer for five days. They also [beat](#) the journalist and his brother (who was also detained for two days) after he refused to hand over his reporting materials and help the authorities fabricate criminal cases against local residents. Askarov told CPJ that the police had also threatened to rape his wife and daughter, but that they had escaped. A U.S.-based physician who visited Askarov in jail last December said Askarov appeared "to have suffered severe and lasting physical injuries as a result of his arrest and incarceration."

After Askarov refused to give police his reporting materials, which implicated local officials in compliance with the conflict, authorities [charged him](#) with incitement to ethnic hatred, calls to mass disorder, attempted kidnapping, illegal possession of ammunition, and complicity in a policeman's murder.

The charges were based on accusations made by regional police, a local mayor, and two of the mayor's employees—the officials who had long threatened to silence Askarov in retaliation for his work. Their statements were conflicting and lacked detail, and there was no physical evidence—such as video footage or statements by impartial witnesses—presented in court. The bullets, which investigators claimed to have found during a search of Askarov's house, were not stored as required for material evidence. Authorities also refused to provide security to the defense witnesses, who could not give their statements in court due to attacks and death threats from the colleagues and relatives of the killed policeman. Authorities also neglected a report by Kyrgyzstan's ombudsman, whose commission investigated Askarov's case and found him innocent on all charges. [Appeals by CPJ](#) and other press freedom and human rights groups were also ignored. In September 2010, a regional court convicted Askarov on all charges and [imprisoned him for life](#). All of his appeals were denied by national courts, including the Supreme Court.

Askarov's case is a vivid example of the [post-conflict media climate](#) in Kyrgyzstan, where the once-vibrant ethnic Uzbek-language media has virtually vanished after facing official [intimidation](#), [harassment](#), and politicized [prosecutions](#), according to CPJ research.

(CPJ is preparing an investigative report that aims to shed light on Askarov's retaliatory prosecution and fabricated charges, as well as the torture he suffered during custody.)

Mr. Chairman, CPJ urges the members of this commission to discuss these issues with high-ranking officials in the Obama administration who can, in turn, raise them in meetings with Uzbek and Kyrgyz officials.

We ask you to use the powers of your office to prevent any violations against press freedom in this politically unstable region. Silencing the media leaves the international community, at a minimum, under-informed about threats to the region such as rampant government corruption, human rights abuses, natural and manmade disasters, outbreaks of chronic diseases, and other issues that hamper the socioeconomic and political development of the region. The global community's strategic interest in Central Asia must not overshadow the importance of free media in the fight against these and other regional threats. We call on you to demand the release of our imprisoned colleagues. Thank you.