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UZBEKISTAN

Key Findings

Particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Uzbekistan through a highly restrictive religion law and harsh penalties on all independent religious activity. The government also imprisons individuals who do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or who it claims are extremist, including as many as 12,000 Muslims. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 that Uzbekistan be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the State Department has so designated Uzbekistan since 2006, it has indefinitely waived taking any punitive action since 2009.

Background

Uzbekistan’s 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations severely limits the rights of all religious groups and facilitates Uzbek government control, particularly of the majority Muslim community. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production and distribution of religious publications; bans minors from religious organizations; and allows only clerics, and not laypeople, to wear religious clothing in public. Many religious groups are unable to meet registration requirements, which include a permanent representation in eight of the country’s 13 provinces. In 2014, a detailed new censorship decree went into effect banning materials that “distort” beliefs or encourage individuals to change religions.

USCIRF staff visited Uzbekistan in October 2013. The visit confirmed previous reporting that the Uzbek government actively represses individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or for alleged association with extremist political programs. While Uzbekistan faces security threats from groups using violence in the

name of religion, the government has arbitrarily used vague anti-extremism laws against peaceful religious adherents and others who pose no credible security threat. In addition, the Uzbek government’s virulent

Uzbek law places severe limits on all religious communities.

campaign against independent Muslims continues. Particular targets include those linked to the May 2005 protests in Andijon of the conviction of 23 businessmen for their alleged membership in the banned Muslim group *Akromiya*. According to the Uzbek NGO, the Andijon-Justice and Revival, 231 individuals are still imprisoned in connection with the Andijon events; 10 prisoners have died. The Uzbek government continues to pressure other countries to return Uzbek refugees who fled after the Andijon tragedy.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

Application of Extremism Laws

The Uzbek government continued its decade-long policy of arresting and imprisoning, some for as long as 20-year terms, an estimated 12,000 Muslims who reject state control over religious practice or affiliation. Many are denied due process and are tortured; some are detained in psychiatric hospitals. In 2013, an estimated 200 religious believers were arrested, according to the Uzbek Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders. The government claims that many detainees are associated with extremist groups that it broadly labels “*Wahhabi*” or “*jihadist*.” Authorities apply these terms to a range of Muslim individuals or groups, including genuine extremists, political opponents, those with foreign education, and others.

Detention Conditions

The Uzbek human rights group *Ezgulik* has reported on the torture of female detainees, including many jailed for their religious beliefs. Despite the Uzbek government's claims, torture remains endemic in prisons, pretrial facilities, and police precincts, and reportedly includes the threat or use of violence, including rape, and the use of gas masks to block victims' air supply. Torture allegedly is used to force adults and children to renounce their religious beliefs or to make confessions. In early 2013, the International Committee for the Red Cross announced it would halt its work in Uzbekistan due to lack of official cooperation.

Restrictions on Muslims

The Uzbek government tightly controls Islamic institutions and prohibits its independent practice. In the Ferghana Valley, the government has confiscated several mosques and banned children from attendance. The government-controlled Muslim Spiritual Board oversees the training, appointments, and dismissals of imams, and censors the content of sermons and Islamic materials. Despite a UN Committee against Torture appeal, Muslim believer Khayrullo Tursonov was returned by Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan; sentenced to a 16-year term in

The Uzbek government campaign against independent Muslims continues.

June 2013, he is now in a camp infested with tuberculosis. In July 2013, Ravshan Rahmatullayev received a six-year jail term for discussing religion in a tea house with five friends. Leading independent Uzbek imam Obid-kori Nazarov, who had received political asylum in Sweden, was the subject of an attempted assassination in early 2012. Despite these restrictions, attendance at registered official mosques is high and the country's former chief mufti, Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, is permitted to run a popular website which includes reports on human rights issues in Uzbekistan.

Charges against Non-Muslims

The government often brands evangelical Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists" for practicing religion

outside of state-sanctioned structures, and they face massive fines, detention, and arrest for "illegal religious activity." Authorities raid meetings of registered and unregistered Christian and Baha'i groups. The state-controlled media encourages prejudice against minority religious groups and has equated missionaries with religious extremists. In October 2013, a Tashkent court ordered the confiscation of a Baptist Union summer camp.

Restrictions on Religious Materials

The Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) censors religious materials. The religion law prohibits the importing, storing, producing, and distributing of unapproved religious materials. Members of religious communities destroy their own sacred texts due to fear of confiscation during police raids. The government maintains an extensive list of banned international websites, particularly those that focus on human rights and religious freedom. In 2013, a CRA official told the Forum 18 News Service that Uzbek law only allows religious texts to be read inside buildings of registered religious groups.

Restrictions on Religious Instruction

Religious instruction is limited to officially-sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors, and only six registered religious communities have met the requirements to conduct religious education (eight legally-registered regional branches). In 2013, a woman was fined for her 12-year-old son's "illegal" religious education; he took art lessons from two Protestants. Private religious education is punished. In 2010 Muslim religion teacher Mehrinisso Hamdamova was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment; she now reportedly is in urgent need of medical attention. The government also restricts international travel for religious purposes and maintains an extensive list of individuals banned from such travel.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

For the past decade, U.S. policy in Central Asia was dominated by the Afghan war, and human rights and religious freedom were not major concerns. USCIRF believes that this policy was shortsighted. The evolving regional geopolitical situation may or may not create new security imperatives for the United States, but USCIRF urges the U.S. government to prioritize religious

freedom and related human rights in Uzbekistan. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate Uzbekistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Lift the waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation, in place since January 2009, and impose sanctions if conditions do not improve within 90-180 days, including a ban on visits to the United States by high-level Uzbek officials;
- Ensure that U.S. statements and actions are coordinated across agencies so that U.S. concerns about human rights are reflected in its public statements and private interactions with the Uzbek government, including calls for the release of religious prisoners and conscientious objectors;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains active contacts with human rights activists and press the Uzbek government to ensure that every prisoner has greater access to his or her family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and a lawyer;
- Make U.S. assistance, except humanitarian assistance and human rights programs, contingent on the Uzbek government's adoption of specific actions to improve religious freedom conditions and comply with international human rights standards, including reforming the 1998 religion law and permitting an international investigation into the 2005 Andijon events;
- Encourage the Board for Broadcasting Governors to ensure continued U.S. funding for the Uzbek Service of the Voice of America, which has been threatened in the recent past;
- Re-establish funding for the State Department's Title VIII program for research, including on religious freedom and human rights, as well as for language programs related to the study of Eurasia; and
- Press for UN Human Rights Council scrutiny of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, as well as raise concerns in other multilateral settings, such as the OSCE, and urge the Uzbek government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Independence of the Judiciary, and Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits.