

25 June 2008

Reporters Without Borders

Contact: Jean-François Julliard

Tel: (33) 1 4483-8484

E-mail: julliard@rsf.org

Language: **English**

**Human Rights Council – universal periodic review
Third session – December 2008**

**Evidence of Reporters Without Borders, an NGO with special consultative status, about
press freedom in UZBEKISTAN**

Introduction: Press freedom

Situation of freedom of expression is very tense and self-censorship is widespread. Many journalists and human rights activists who struggled for freedom of expression are still imprisoned. Among them stands President's nephew Jamshid Karimov who is kept in a psychiatric hospital since 5 October 2006.

Repression has become harsher since the 13 May 2005 uprising in the eastern town of Andijan, when about 800 people were killed, according to non-governmental organisations (187 according to the government). Offices of foreign media were closed and their staff forced to leave the country, including those of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the US media aid organisation Internews and Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty.

Some journalists still continue to work for foreign medias but under constant threat of deprivation of accreditation given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without which they cannot operate. This situation leads them to work with caution and frequently abstain from publishing any sensitive information. Uzbek journalists too were front-line targets of the crackdown and they still can be fired for the slightest offence. In spring of this year the Uzbek Agency of Press and Information (UzAPI) renewed practice of "loyalty check" of Uzbek journalists. Also, according to correspondents of three central newspapers, journalists were reminded that the editorial policy of these newspapers is "popularization and propaganda of the policy of the President and the government of Uzbekistan". Only those journalists enjoying the National Security Service's approval are able to work in leading positions in mass media outlets. This is especially true in case of TV and radio broadcasters.

Recent releases of activists (Mutabar Tadjibaeva) and political prisoners (for instance Akhmadjon Adylov) may have given the feeling that Uzbekistan was engaging on a liberalization path. However recent events contradict this interpretation.

First, on 9-10 June, authorities held “International seminar on freedom of media in a modern democratic society” in Tashkent. Intended as an EU-Uzbekistan civil society dialogue seminar on media freedom, the conference turned into what Reporters Without Borders, International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and Open Society Institute called a “sad farce and empty shadow” as those with critical voices, who would have highlighted the regime’s appalling record on media freedom and other human rights abuses, have been locked out of the discussion.

Second, while the seminar was being held, journalists were being arrested or threatened and independent information web sites were attacked.

On 7th of June, Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov, independent journalist and human right activist has been arrested in the western autonomous region of Karakalpakstan on a drug possession charge which fellow journalists believe was trumped up. Then, on June 10, state television stations Namangan TV and Ferghana TV broadcasted a program that attacked Radio Free Europe (RFE), and gave the addresses of its Uzbek correspondents and the schools attended by their children. Lasting more than an hour and broadcast several times by the two government TV stations, the programme called RFE’s correspondents “traitors”. At the same time, two independent web sites, uznews.net and ferghana.ru were blocked for few hours.

Restrictive laws allow the authorities to persecute any journalist whose critical information is considered by the government as hostile to Uzbekistan, including amendments to the Criminal Code adopted on 17 February 2004 – which effectively criminalise the sharing of information critical of human rights in the country.

Access to the information is restricted not only for journalists, and ordinary people are also deprived from up to date, free public information access.

1/ Free flow of information online

The network has developed, grows constantly and in 2006 Uzbekistan had more Internet-users than owners of mobile phones.

However there is no diversity of opinion. The state network UzPAK is the only one in the country and since 2005, all access providers to local Internet have to connect through it. Websites do not however have to register with the authorities. Some of the 447 companies authorised to commercialise Internet access are sometimes linked to the Russian network.

The law on media freedom which was adopted in 2003, imposes a series of restrictions on the dissemination of news online. Article 4 stipulates that “freedom to inform can be limited in the name of the protection (...) of moral values of the community, national security and the country’s spiritual, cultural and scientific potential”. The vague formulation of these principles leaves a lot of room for interpretation and extensive and improper censorship. The same goes for other articles which invoke the “preservation of cultural and historic values” and “social stability”.

The government continues to block access of ordinary internet users to websites or to specific content on web-sites that contain critical information about Uzbekistan. All local service providers (ISPs) have been forced since November 2005 to use the state-controlled telecom operator Uzbektelecom, which enables the regime to compile blacklists. There is no access to

sites of oppositional and unregistered political parties Erk and Birlik. Internet users get constant refusal in access to sites of such online outlets as Fergana.ru, Uznews.net, Muslimuzbekistan.org, Newsuz.com.

2/ Government efforts to improve the situation

None.

3/ Recommendations

- End all forms of censorship, including repealing the 2004 amendments to the criminal code;
- Cease harassment and intimidation of independent journalists working in the country;
- Lift reporting restrictions on all domestic and international media outlets;
- Release journalists wrongfully detained for their professional activities and others detained for exercising their freedom of expression.
- Allow international media outlets, including those that have been forced to stop working in Uzbekistan, to register their bureaus and grant accreditation to international journalists.

Methods used

The material in this update was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a worldwide network of correspondents (in 130 countries) and partner organisations (in about 20).

Journalists in some countries can be sent to prison for several years just for a word or a photo that offends. Jailing or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens the right of each of us to be kept informed. Reporters Without Borders has been fighting day-by-day for press freedom since it was founded in 1985.