



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Ambassador Erozan, Head of Center, Tashkent

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 2, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We would also like to welcome Ambassador Erozan to the Permanent Council and thank you for the excellent work you and your team are doing in Uzbekistan.

It is also a pleasure to see Mr. Armanov from the OSCE Desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Uzbekistan; and we take this as a positive sign of Uzbekistan's commitment to the OSCE, and I'm also delighted that he'll be going on to Warsaw. That also clearly demonstrates Uzbekistan's interest in engagement.

The United States is very encouraged by the growing cooperation and collaboration between the Government of Uzbekistan and the Center in Tashkent. We are pleased that the Government is developing projects and presenting them to the Center. That is a form of active participation that will ultimately lead to more successful activities and greater host country satisfaction with the OSCE presence.

We know that economic development is a priority for the Government of Uzbekistan, and we applaud the Center's efforts to foster business development, particularly its work with small and medium sized enterprises. Such enterprises are the engine of growth in many economies, and we urge the Uzbek authorities to continue to improve the environment for small business development. However as I saw during my visit there last week, much work does need to be done here.

The entrepreneurial handbook that is currently being developed will be a useful asset to young people starting businesses in Uzbekistan.

In connection with my trip two weeks ago Mr. Chairman, Deputy Foreign Minister Norov confirmed his government's intent to float the Soum by the end of this year and we urge the Government to stick to that plan and float the currency in line with international standards. A modified float, which we know is being considered, with access to foreign currency being restricted to businesses, would not be in Uzbekistan's best interests.

Uzbekistan's steps toward accession to the Aarhus Convention are another sign of positive change in the country. The Convention has been a valuable tool in many countries for environmental protection and civil society development.

On the political front there have also been positive steps, but areas for concern remain. While we applaud the official abolishment of censorship in Uzbekistan, we urge the Government to take additional positive steps that will actively foster a climate that encourages a truly free press.

At present it seems that even without official censorship, journalists are sufficiently concerned about reprisals that they self-censor, rather than publish material that might be offensive to the Government. This is worrisome and it is something that I personally observed in my press contacts while I was visiting.

As we noted when President Ahtisaari was here, an independent media is essential in a democratic society, as it acts and serves as a watchdog. Moreover, in many legal systems, such as in the United States and some parts of Europe, "unbecoming" stories published about public officials are only slanderous if they are untrue.

Public officials are responsible to those they serve, and misdeeds should be brought to public attention, however uncomfortable for the officials involved. Also, it is inherent in political life that views will differ. Politicians must accept the reality of criticism, even harsh criticism, as a normal part of public service.

The United States shares the Center's concern about journalist Ruslan Sharipov. Like others, we harbor concerns that the case against Mr. Sharipov is politically motivated. The repetitive coincidence of journalists being convicted of criminal acts creates a suspicious rhythm, which we cannot ignore.

The United States welcomes the government registration of a second recognized human rights NGO (Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan) in 2003, and the fact that several other HR NGOs have been allowed to operate despite the lack of registration. Their status, however, should be formalized in a prompt manner.

We applaud the Government's engagement on prison reform, and in responding to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. Obviously, these are important and difficult issues, but ones where everyone agrees that improvements are needed.

We see the Government's Action Plan on Torture as a positive step, but are concerned that the timeline for implementation is too long. We need to see concrete steps taken as soon as possible. Starting in late 2002, Uzbekistan has allowed the ICRC to inspect prison conditions. We are pleased that the ICRC has exercised this right with some frequency in 2003. Also, the US Embassy was allowed to visit two of the most notorious facilities. Reports we received from our embassy are that conditions are indeed improving.

We also welcome Uzbekistan's invitation for a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture in December 2002. The Special Rapporteur's report was tough on Uzbekistan, but Uzbekistan responded with constructive statements acknowledging problems and opened a dialogue with foreign ambassadors and UN officials.

I think the upcoming visit of prison directors to Poland will be a tremendously useful exercise. As one of the Deputy Mayors of Tashkent commented to me during my recent trip when he was here in Vienna to learn about city administration, he found once again that "seeing once is better than hearing a thousand times." One of the things that most troubled me in Uzbekistan was hearing that family members were not informed about prisoner's deaths. We strongly urge Uzbekistan officials as part of their overall prison reforms to institute a policy of notifying family members when prisoners die and to turn the bodies over to the families for burial. This seems to us to be both reasonable and humane.

On regional cooperation, we applaud the initiative to involve Afghan customs and border guards in upcoming training exercises. This is something our Afghan partners have asked for, and it is a strong and positive indication of countries in the region working together to solve problems of common concern.

In closing then Mr. Chairman, again let me thank Ambassador Erozan for his thorough report and for the fine job that he and his staff are doing Uzbekistan.

Thank you.