

May 19, 2005: Uzbekistan: Commissioner to testify on Capitol Hill

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 11, 2005 Contact:

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Uzbekistan: Commissioner to testify on Capitol Hill WASHINGTON - Commissioner Michael Cromartie is testifying today at a briefing of the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, or Helsinki Commission, on "Unrest in Uzbekistan: Crisis and Prospects." The briefing will be held from 1:30-3:30 p.m. in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 138. Given recent events in Uzbekistan, the briefing will examine policy options for Washington and Tashkent, the causes of the current crisis, the history of the regime, including its record of human rights abuses, and the regime's relationship to the United States. In April 2005, the Commission recommended to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the State Department designate Uzbekistan a "country of particular concern," or CPC, in accordance with the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act due to its egregious, systematic, and ongoing violations of religious freedom. CPC designation carries with it the requirement that the U.S. government take specific policy actions, up to and including the cessation of economic and security assistance. The Commission's 2005 Annual Report includes a number of recommendations for U.S. policy. Many of those recommendations were formulated on the basis of a Commission trip to Uzbekistan in October 2004, when the Commission met with government officials, human rights activists, religious leaders, and former prisoners in the Ferghana Valley, including in Andijon, as well as in Tashkent and Samarkand. Uzbek government policies towards religious groups and individuals foreshadowed the tragedy in Andijon. 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 Uzbek government also exercises a high degree of control over the manner in which the Islamic faith is practiced. 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. Security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members of 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. The State Department and international human rights organizations have concluded that many of the thousands of prisoners in Uzbekistan have been convicted on charges related to their religious beliefs, practices, or alleged association, and not on specific evidence of advocacy of, or engagement in, acts of violence. The recent tragic events in Andijon occurred as a result of public protests 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 Hizb ut-Tahrir. 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. USCIRF Commissioner Cromartie said, "The Commission joins those who are calling for an international investigation, possibly by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which has an on-the-ground presence in Uzbekistan, to clarify the tragic course of events in Andijon."

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