

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington, DC – While welcoming the Uzbek government's release of Yusuf Jumaev on May 18, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today called on Uzbekistan's government to free thousands of religious and political prisoners. Jumaev, a dissident poet, was serving a five-year sentence in the notorious Jaslyk prison after protesting the 2005 killing of hundreds of Muslim demonstrators in the town of Andijon. In its May 2011 Annual Report, USCIRF raised his case, along with those of others unjustly imprisoned.

"We welcome the Uzbek government's release of Yusuf Jumaev; he will now be able to reunite with family in the United States," said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo. "Yet thousands more Uzbeks remain jailed due to their beliefs. The U.S. must continue to press President Karimov for their release and for religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan to improve."

Jumaev's poems protested the government-ordered shooting of civilians in a largely peaceful May 13, 2005 demonstration in Andijon. While in Jaslyk prison, Jumaev, like many of the estimated 5,000 political and religious prisoners, was reportedly subjected to beatings which broke his ribs and fingers, his wife told USCIRF in 2010. Torture remains endemic in Uzbek jails, and reportedly includes the threat or use of physical violence and rape and the use of gas masks. Since the May 2005 atrocity, the Uzbek government has rejected numerous calls for an independent international investigation, and the number of trials against independent Muslims and anyone with alleged links to the Andijon tragedy has surged.

Uzbekistan has a religion law which severely limits the rights of religious communities, especially the majority Muslim community. The government arrests Muslims and represses Muslim groups that fail to conform to government requirements or that allegedly endorse political extremism. It continues to apply vague anti-extremism laws arbitrarily against nonviolent religious adherents and others who pose no credible security threat.

USCIRF continues to recommend in 2011 that Uzbekistan be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, marking it as one of the world's worst religious freedom violators.

Since 2006, the State Department has so designated Uzbekistan, but after 2009 it placed a de facto indefinite waiver on any punitive actions. Uzbekistan plays an important role in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that supplies U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan.

“The United States should use the CPC designation of Uzbekistan to press for serious reforms,” said Mr. Leo. “The current waiver of any sanctions against Uzbek officials sends the wrong message of impunity for lethal actions in Andijon and mass violations of religious freedom. Until conditions improve, real sanctions should be imposed.”

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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