



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Uzbek Human Rights Defenders Elena Urlaeva and Azam Farmonov

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 4, 2015

The United States would like to draw attention to two human rights-related cases in Uzbekistan.

The United States is deeply concerned about recent reports that respected human rights activist **Elena Urlaeva** was detained and subjected to an unnecessary and humiliating search by local authorities in the city of Chinaz, Uzbekistan, on May 31, 2015. While Ms. Urlaeva was conducting human rights-related activities, including reporting on possible forced labor in the cotton sector, Uzbek security services reportedly detained her for 18 hours and searched her person for a flash drive. The physically invasive search, accompanied by further humiliation by local authorities, was an affront to her dignity and appears contrary to Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations. It also undermines Uzbekistan's steps to reform its cotton labor practices. The United States calls on the government of Uzbekistan to investigate this incident.

The United States also calls attention to the case of imprisoned activist **Azam Farmonov**. Mr. Farmonov, a rural development activist, was sentenced in 2006 to a term of nine years in prison on charges of extortion. His case was highlighted by the United Nations Committee Against Torture in 2013. Mr. Farmonov was due to be released in April 2015, but his term was extended by five years for allegedly violating prison rules. We call on the government of Uzbekistan to immediately release Mr. Farmonov, who had served out the sentence he had been given, and to refrain from extending sentences for alleged violations of prison rules. The practice of extending sentences has become a disturbing pattern in cases of those imprisoned for religious reasons or for defending human rights.

These two cases are troubling examples of the challenges that human rights activists in Uzbekistan face. We urge the government of Uzbekistan to allow human rights defenders and civil society activists to conduct their important work without fear of harassment or imprisonment as an unequivocal demonstration of Uzbekistan's commitment to its national and international human rights obligations and commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.