



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Freimut Duve**

25 September 2003

Statement under Current Issues

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The fifth OSCE Central Asia Media Conference was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 17-18 September. The conference titled *Media in Multi-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Societies* was attended by journalists, government officials, and members of parliament and civil society from the four Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Participants from Turkmenistan were not able to attend because they were denied exit visas by the state authorities.

In general, media freedom in all the Central Asian states has deteriorated since our last conference. This includes the host country Kyrgyzstan.

In the whole region libel cases, outright pressure, both physical and psychological, imprisonment on dubious and trumped up charges and denying access to information, are becoming a way of life for journalists in the region.

Politicians and government officials are less and less tolerant of criticism. A system reminiscent of cults of personality from the 20th century is taking hold in some of the OSCE participating States, an organisation that prides itself on representing democratic governments.

Those speaking at the conference were sometimes reluctant to be overly critical of their countries fearing reprisals at home. Journalists working for the non-government media are literally on the front line of defending freedom of expression in this OSCE region. It is in certain ways a battle between the retrogrades from the Soviet past and the few reporters and editors who are trying to develop a civil society based on fundamental freedoms. Unfortunately, the retrogrades are on the offensive and taking new ground.

There are many cases of harassment of journalists in Central Asia, too many to list here. That is why I will focus only on the two most egregious ones: Ruslan Sharipov, an independent journalist from Uzbekistan, was sentenced to five years in prison this August for having allegedly committed several sexual-related crimes. After months of maintaining his innocence, Sharipov suddenly changed his plea to guilty, waived his right to legal counsel and apologized to the authorities for criticizing them in his articles. Last week, a letter written by Sharipov to the UN Secretary-General was being distributed worldwide by the NGO community. In it Sharipov explains that he only confessed after police brutally tortured and threatened to kill him as well as to infect him with the AIDS virus. I and my successor will have to look more closely into cases of torture of journalists.

In Kazakhstan, Sergei Duvanov continues to serve his sentence on charges that have been questioned by several legal experts and after a court hearing that has been broadly criticized for many irregularities. I understand that in November President Nazarbayev plans to address this forum. If by then the case of Duvanov is not resolved I will have no other choice but to raise his fate here in the Permanent Council directly with the President.

The participants at the Bishkek Conference adopted a declaration that is attached to my statement. It outlines points of concern to my office and to the journalists in the region. I would just like to once again underline: media freedom is an essential component of a democratic civil society. If the Central Asian governments are in reality interested in sticking to the values they have signed up to when they accepted my mandate they must take a long and hard look at their current record and make some serious changes in their attitudes towards the media.

Thank you.