

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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**HRW.org**

Baroness Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Vice-President of the European Commission
242, rue de la Loi
B-1049 Brussels

Brussels, November 15, 2012

Re: Your Forthcoming Trip to Central Asia

Dear High Representative Ashton,

Your trip to Central Asia provides an historic opportunity for the European Union (EU) to put into meaningful practice the commitments made in the recently adopted EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy. With the adoption of the Strategic Framework the EU pledged that human rights, democracy, and the rule of law will be promoted “in all areas of the EU’s external actions without exception” and that it would throw its “full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy, and human rights throughout the world.” Your visit to Central Asia is significant as your first one to the region, but also as a litmus test for the EU to demonstrate its commitment to implementing the strong human rights pledges made in June.

Your visit to the region comes at a time of retrenchment on respect for human rights in all five Central Asian countries. It also comes at a time when international actors are focusing strongly on military and security issues in relation to international operations in Afghanistan and on maximizing hydrocarbon energy supplies to Europe. Human rights activists and rights organizations in Central Asia and the public they engage with are anxious that security and energy interests drown out voices raising human rights concerns.

To varying degrees across the region, human rights and civil society activists face highly restrictive laws as well as government interference, harassment, imprisonment, physical threats, and violence. The conditions for human rights work in the region are worsening even as activists confront a deepening human rights crisis and take on issues of urgent and fundamental importance.

- **We urge you to meet with human rights activists in each country during your visit to Central Asia to hear for yourself the ongoing challenges they face and the remedies they recommend. In pledging to meet with human rights activists you will send the message that the EU will always engage with those who work for human rights and underscores the importance the EU places on its relationships with civil society.**

Throughout Central Asia, human rights defenders, civil society groups, and political opposition activists languish in prisons for no reason other than their legitimate, peaceful work, and human rights organizations face burdensome requirements, harassment, and closure.

- In **Kazakhstan**, Vladimir Kozlov, a political opposition leader, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison after an unfair trial on overbroad charges including “inciting social discord.” His appeal is due to be heard on November 19.
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, Azimjon Askarov a prominent human rights defender who has worked on documenting police treatment of detainees, remains wrongfully imprisoned. He was found guilty in the killing of a policeman and several officers during mass unrest in June 2010 and sentenced to life in prison, despite a prosecution marred by serious violations of fair trial standards, allegations of torture, violence, and threats that the authorities have refused to investigate.
- In **Tajikistan**, a court granted the Ministry of Justice’s petition to shut down Amparo, a young lawyers association that investigates torture and advocates for victims of rights abuses, on what appear to be politically motivated charges.
- In **Turkmenistan**, government repression is so severe that very few human rights activists work openly. Untold numbers of people are in prison for political reasons, including Annakurban Amanklychv and Sapardurdy Khajiev, who worked with human rights organizations prior to their imprisonment in 2006, and political dissident Gulgeldy Annaniyozov, whose relatives have had no information about him since his imprisonment in 2008.
- In **Uzbekistan**, the government’s crackdown on independent human rights activists has been unrelenting. Human rights defenders in prison for no reason other than their legitimate human rights work include: Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Azam Formonov, Nosim Isakov, Gaibullo Jalilov, Rasul Khudainasarov, Ganihon Mamatkhanov, Yuldash Rasulov, Dilmurod Saidov, Akzam Turgunov, and Gulnaza Yuldasheva.

This catalog of cases, while not exhaustive, illustrates the disturbing trend for activists across the region.

- **We strongly urge you to show the EU’s support for civil society in Central Asia by highlighting the plight of human rights defenders and other activists in your meetings with governments and in your public statements, and by calling for the release of those wrongfully imprisoned.**

We hope that the attached briefing paper summarizing areas of concern and key recommendations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, will help to shape your agenda for engagement with the Central Asia governments and identify issues about which to voice the EU’s concern at the highest level in private discussions and public outreach.

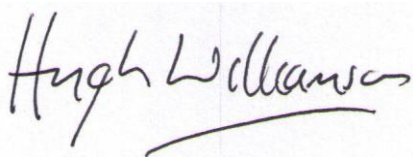
- **We urge you to make meetings with human rights defenders a non-negotiable element of your Central Asia trip and to articulate publicly key recommendations for human rights reforms in each country to signal the importance the EU places on these issues and to underscore that deepening the EU relationship will depend on concrete human rights improvements. In other words we urge you to implement in practice the pledges made in the EU Strategic Framework of June.**

There has never been a more critical time for you to engage the governments in the region on human rights concerns and signal clearly to your partners in the region and to the public that the EU will vigorously implement its commitment to protect and promote human rights around the world.

Sincerely,



Lotte Leicht
EU Director



Hugh Williamson
Europe and Central Asia Program Director

Cc:

Secretary-General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Mr. Pierre Vimont
Deputy Secretary General for the European External Action Service (EEAS), Ms. Helga Schmid
Deputy Secretary General for the European External Action Service (EEAS), Mr. Maciej Popowski
Head of Cabinet to the High Representative, Mr. James Morrison
Advisor to the High Representative on Central Asia, Mr. Carl Hartzell
EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Stavros Lambrinidis
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan, Ambassador Aurélia Bouchez
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Kyrgyzstan, Ambassador Chantal Hebberecht
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan, Ambassador Eduard Auer
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan, Ambassador Norbert Yousten
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Chair of the EU's Political and Security Committee, Ambassador Olaf Skoog
Chair of the EU's Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Mr. Petteri Vuorimäki
Chair of the EU's Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM), Mr. Engelbert Theuermann
President of the European Parliament, Mr. Martin Schulz
Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for Democracy and Human Rights, Mr. Edward McMillan-Scott
Chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Elmar Brok
Chair of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, Ms. Barbara Lochbihler

Chair of the European Parliament's Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan and EU-Uzbekistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees, and for relations with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Mongolia, Mr. Paolo Bartolozzi