

Event Report:

'Four Years after Andijan: Remembering the Prisoners of Conscience in Uzbekistan'

OSI Brussels,
13 May 2009, 12.30-14.00

On the fourth anniversary of the massacre of civilians by Uzbek government forces in Andijan, OSI Brussels organised an informal briefing with **Vitaly Ponomarev**, Head of the Central Asia Programme at Memorial Human Rights Centre. Mr Ponomarev is one of Russia's leading experts on Central Asia, and the author of numerous articles on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan and the wider region.

At the outset Mr. Ponomarev explained that Memorial has been monitoring political repression in Uzbekistan since 1999, and that they have compiled a comprehensive list which documents individual cases of victims of persecution by the Uzbek authorities during a wave of repression which arose after the Andijan events. Mr. Ponomarev spoke at length on the brutal repression which followed the Andijan uprising which was targeted not only against persons suspected of involvement in the 2005 protest but also those linked to them by kinship ties, as well as human rights activists and independent journalists who witnessed the events. Among the three hundred and fifty-seven people charged for alleged participation in Andijan, two are known to have died in prison in the autumn of 2008 and an additional suspect detained in November 2008 died following torture in custody that same month. During the crackdown against human rights defenders and independent journalists in the 2005-2007 period, thirty-eight people were brought to trial, twelve of whom continue to serve prison sentences.

There are still many questions surrounding the events in Andijan, particularly as there has still been no formal independent investigation into the tragedy, despite requests by the international community. Nevertheless, the Uzbek government continues to use the uprising as a way of justifying its repressive policies towards practising Muslims. Repression against Muslims, which declined in the second half of 2006, has been on the rise since the summer of 2008, and information has been received recently about the arrest of over two hundred alleged 'extremists' prompting Ponomarev to cite a possible 'new wave' of repression. Memorial's database includes a list of 1,452 people who have been sentenced to jail for criminal activity between 2005 and 2008, 94% of whom belong to independent Muslim organisations. Those sentenced are given long jail terms, with 80% receiving an average of ten to twelve years. Ponomarev argues on the basis of the data gathered that the majority of individuals sentenced on grounds of extremism could be categorised as 'prisoners of conscience'. This is a broader category, including journalists, human rights activists, and members of unofficial wings of Islam.

Furthermore, citing a US State Department report that repression by the Uzbek authorities is on the decline, Ponomarev expressed his concern that the international community is underestimating the scale of repression in Uzbekistan because analysis often does not address cases of persecution on religious grounds. Although the EU has played a positive role in exerting pressure on the Uzbek authorities resulting in the release of some prisoners of conscience, notably human rights defenders, hundreds of people who have been imprisoned on religious grounds remain in detention because they have been excluded from the political dialogue. He warned that the West's silence on the repression against Muslims could be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of such practices, and could result in alienating Uzbek

Muslims against the West. In conclusion, he stressed the need for the international community to recognise the link between the repression of religious groups by the Uzbek government, and a possible spread of Islamism. He added that there is not enough focus on what authoritarian governments are doing internally as part of a 'war on terror', and how their actions affect the region as a whole.