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Human Rights Watch

**Oral Statement**

**Item 6 - Adoption of the UPR outcome of Uzbekistan**

**19 September 2013**

Human Rights Watch welcomes the adoption of the outcome of the UPR of Uzbekistan, which reflects many important recommendations from a wide array of governments on long-standing and urgent human rights concerns, including: the continued imprisonment of human rights defenders and political prisoners; the ongoing crackdown on local civil society, and the inability of international non-governmental organizations and media outlets to operate in the country; the widespread problem of torture in the criminal justice system; the lack of freedom of expression, association, and assembly; the lack of accountability for the May 2005 massacre at Andijan; forced labor of adults and children in the cotton sector; the government's failure to cooperate with special procedures of the Human Rights Council; and reports of the forced sterilization of women.

We deeply regret that the Uzbek government rejected the majority of the most relevant and urgent recommendations relating to its atrocious human rights record, including all of those just mentioned. In addition, during the presentation by Uzbekistan and the interactive dialogue and responses, the Uzbek delegation made numerous misrepresentations about the human rights situation in the country that should be addressed and amended in its future representations to the Human Rights Council.

For example, the Uzbek delegation categorically denied the existence of political prisoners while it currently holds well over a dozen human rights activists in prison for no other reason than their legitimate and peaceful civic activism. It also continues to imprison numerous independent journalists, peaceful opposition activists, intellectuals, and writers. It has also sentenced thousands of persons on vague and overly broad charges of so-called "religious extremism" for, among other reasons, exercising their freedom of worship outside of strict state controls.

Many of those imprisoned on politically-motivated charges have been subjected to torture and are in ill-health. Uzbekistan should heed the recommendations of numerous governments at the UPR to immediately and unconditionally release wrongfully imprisoned human rights defenders, journalists, and peaceful opposition activists, and re-examine the sentences of all prisoners convicted under charges relating to "religious extremism" or "anti-constitutional activity."

In April 2013, in a deeply troubling development, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) took the unusual step of announcing publicly its decision to end prison visits to detainees in Uzbekistan, citing its inability to follow the organization's standard working procedures for such visits, including being able to access all detainees of concern and speaking with detainees in private. Yet the Uzbek delegation laid blame for this move on the ICRC, a cynical misrepresentation of the facts. The well-documented problem of torture in Uzbekistan's police stations and prisons underlines the urgent need for Uzbekistan to accept and act on the recommendation to immediately allow the ICRC to resume its operations in the country without interference.

We also deeply regret that Uzbekistan rejected the recommendation from a number of states to extend open and standing invitations in a timely manner to the Special Procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council

who have requested to visit the country. For the past eleven years, it has denied access to all UN special monitors who have requested invitations, and the number of pending request also stands at eleven. The government should immediately accept and act on this recommendation.

Regarding civil society operations, the Uzbek government delegation stated that "respect for the rights and interests of NGOs is guaranteed" and that "the number of NGOs is constantly growing... with over 6400 organizations" (Paragraph 14). However, for over a decade now the government has refused to register local independent human rights organizations and actively harasses and prosecutes independent rights defenders and journalists on a wide array of trumped-up charges. It has also forced the closure of numerous international NGOs and media outlets, including Human Rights Watch's Tashkent office, ending, in 2011, our 15-year presence in the country. None of the organizations that were forced to end their operations have been able to resume their activities in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek government should immediately end the crackdown on local civil society and allow the unimpeded operation of international organizations and media outlets in the country, including by allowing visas and accreditation to their staff.

We also deeply regret the government's rejection of recommendations to decriminalize consensual same-sex relations, and urge it to reconsider its stance on the issue.

The Uzbek government did not seize the UPR as an opportunity to commit to much-needed rights reforms, but instead maintained its well-established stance of denial and obfuscation. The government's atrocious human rights record and its continued refusal of access to no fewer than 11 Special Procedures, should lead the Human Rights Council to establish more serious scrutiny through a country-specific monitoring mechanism.