

8 June 2015

Mr. Michel Forst,
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – Palais Wilson
United Nations Office at Geneva
CH 1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Dear Mr. Forst:

In addition to the allegation letter on 7 April 2015, we write to request Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to intervene and ask the Government of Uzbekistan to take all appropriate action to investigate and address the arrest and torture of Uzbek human rights defender, Elena Urlaeva.

The Victim

Ms. Elena Urlaeva, President of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, lives in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. For more than a decade, Ms. Urlaeva has been monitoring and reporting on a wide range of human rights issues, including police abuse, torture, forced child labor, and more recently, economic and social rights. Uzbek authorities have subjected her to forced psychiatric treatment on numerous occasions. In 2010, she was awarded the Per Anger Prize in Sweden for her ‘non-violent and unselfish struggle for human rights in her country.’

Human Rights Violation Occurred

On 31 May, Ms. Urlaeva was arrested, and subjected to physical and sexual abuse by Uzbek police while she was documenting forced labor of Uzbek teachers and medics weeding the cotton field.

Ms. Urlaeva had been documenting the Uzbek government’s forced mobilization of teachers and doctors to clear weeds from cotton fields near the city of Chinaz in Tashkent region. Kindergarten teachers told her that the mayor had ordered the schools to send them to weed the fields. Urlaeva also photographed 60 physicians pressed into work in the cotton fields by representatives of the city hall.

Police then arrested Ms. Urlaeva, injected her three times with sedatives, which left her drowsy and weak. Ms. Urlaeva was placed on a bed by police and medical staff and was forced to spread her legs. The head of the police ordered a female doctor to search for the data card in Ms. Urlaeva’s vagina. The doctor then asked the police to bring a gynecological instrument and they forced Ms. Urlaeva onto a chair and police officers and a male doctor held her arms and legs while the doctor used the instrument to search her vagina for the data card, causing bleeding.

Then the head of the police ordered the doctor to search Ms. Urlaeva's rectum. After that, the police and medics carried Ms. Urlaeva on a stretcher to a hospital, where she was forced to undergo x-rays of her chest and abdomen.

Throughout the ordeal, police denied Ms. Urlaeva from using the toilet and forced her to relieve herself outside the police station in the presence of police. The police filmed Ms. Urlaeva and threatened to post the video on the internet if she complained about her treatment. The police humiliated Ms. Urlaeva throughout her detention and called her a "bitch." They confiscated her camera, notebook, and information sheet on the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

Subsequent Actions Taken

After her release on 31 May 2015, Ms. Urlaeva protested in front of the local passport office in Chinaz city on 5 June 2015, demanding justice. Ms. Urlaeva is currently looking for a lawyer who can take her case to the court to demand investigation and punishment of the policeman tortured her, but has not been successful.

The Cotton Campaign, Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, and Anti-Slavery International sent letters to the U.S., EU, German, and British Ambassadors in Uzbekistan, requesting to investigate and document the case. However, no response was heard from any of the Ambassadors.

The brutalization of Ms. Urlaeva has been widely reported online: the Cotton Campaign released the press release on 2 June 2015¹; Human Rights Watch published an online article on 4 June 2015²; and *the diplomat* posted the article on 5 June 2015³.

Link Between the Violation and Human Rights Work

The violent response by the Chinaz police reflects an essential element of the government's forced labor system: the use of coercion—imprisonment, assault, harassment and intimidation of citizens reporting human rights concerns.

Every year, the government of Uzbekistan forces the citizens for the cotton production: during the springtime, citizens are mobilized to weed the cotton field and the mass mobilization is conducted in the fall, during the harvest season. As this is contrary to Uzbek government's official position that they do not maintain the forced labor system, it is strictly prohibited to visit the cotton field and document any incidents in the cotton field. If anyone is found to investigate the forced labor, the authority inflicts the harm to discourage the report of the forced labor in the cotton sector.

¹ The Cotton Campaign, Uzbek Police Brutalize Human Rights Monitor Elena Urlaeva, 2 June 2015, <http://www.cottoncampaign.org/uzbek-police-brutalize-human-rights-monitor-elena-urlaeva.html>

² Human Rights Watch, Uzbekistan: Brutal Police Attack On Activist, 4 June 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/04/uzbekistan-brutal-police-attack-activist>

³ The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Bravest Woman Beaten by Police, 5 June 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/uzbekistans-bravest-woman-beaten-by-police/>

Ms. Urlaeva has been numerously harassed and detained by the police for past 10 years; and there was recent report that an international labor rights consultant, Dr. Andre Mrost, was arrested, detained, deported and banned from the country for conducting monitoring on 19 March 2015.⁴

Thus, it is clear that the arrest and torture of Ms. Urlaeva was consistent with the Uzbek government's constant arrest, harassment, intimidation and violence against independent monitors for reporting the situation of the forced labor in the cotton sector.

We are concerned for the safety of Ms. Urlaeva, and fear that she may be subjected to further harassment, detention, and torture in her connection with her pursuit of justice against those responsible for torturing her, as well as her ongoing human rights work.

Therefore, we request Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to intervene and ask the Government of Uzbekistan to conduct an open and transparent investigation of the arrest and torture of Ms. Urlaeva, with those public officials responsible to be brought to justice in an open and fair trial; and for the Government to issue a public statement that: 1) independent human rights organizations, activists and journalists have the right to investigate and report on conditions in the cotton production sector without facing retaliation and 2) any police or officials who assault or detain monitors will be prosecuted.

Sincerely,

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⁴ The Cotton Campaign, Uzbek government arrests and deports international labor rights consultant, 24 March 2015, <http://www.cottoncampaign.org/uzbek-government-arrests-and-deports-international-labor-rights-consultant.html>