



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Prosecution of Journalists in Tajikistan

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 20, 2011

The United States joins in the sentiments expressed by the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media on October 17 when she welcomed the release of journalists Mahmadyusuf Ismoilov and Urunboi Usmonov in Tajikistan. However, we remain concerned that both journalists were convicted on charges resulting from their professional activities, and we urge authorities to review both cases on appeal in order to ensure compliance with Tajikistan's OSCE commitments and international standards.

On October 14, Mahmadyusuf Ismoilov, a journalist with the weekly newspaper Nuri Zindagi, was found guilty of criminal libel, insult, extortion, and incitement of regional hatred by a court in the city of Khojand. The court sentenced him to pay a fine of 35,000 somoni to the government officials he allegedly insulted. The sentence also banned him from working as a journalist for three years. Ismoilov, who had been held in custody since November 2010, was released following the verdict. Prosecutors had called for a 16-year jail term for Ismoilov.

Also on 14 October, a court in Sugdh Province sentenced BBC journalist Uronboi Usmonov to a three-year jail term on charges of participation in the activities of a banned organization. The court, however, immediately amnestied Usmonov. Following his arrest in June 2011, Usmonov spent approximately one month in custody before being released on bail in July. Unfortunately, there were credible reports that he was beaten while detained by authorities.

Both cases raise serious questions about the freedom of the media in Tajikistan, and the record of these trials suggests authorities in Tajikistan use criminal charges against journalists to punish them for their journalistic activities. While we are pleased that both have been released from custody, we are deeply concerned about the chilling effect such cases will undoubtedly have on other journalists.

We urge authorities in Tajikistan to review each of the matters in light of Tajikistan's commitments to media freedom, and we repeat our call for all OSCE participating States to decriminalize defamation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.