



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Address by OSCE Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan, H. E. Ambassador Istvan Venczel

As delivered by Casey Christensen, Political Counselor
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 5, 2011

The United States warmly welcomes Ambassador Istvan Venczel back to the Permanent Council. Once again, this year, I am pleased to express our deep appreciation for the work that you and your staff accomplish in Uzbekistan. For a small team, you make a big difference for the people of Uzbekistan and we are grateful to you and your staff.

The improved relations that you have recounted today between the Government of Uzbekistan and the Project Coordinator's Office have not gone unnoticed, nor have the increases in the number and the scope of the projects being handled by the Office. Perhaps most auspicious is the news that this year the project agreement process was completed in February. The Government of Uzbekistan also deserves our gratitude for its willingness to speed up the process this year. We certainly hope this is a trend that will continue well into the future.

Other positive developments over the past year include the cooperation between the Project Coordinator's Office and so many of the OSCE institutions and offices. A visit to Uzbekistan by the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media in April marked an important moment in OSCE – Uzbekistan relations. We strongly urge the government to continue these highly positive steps.

Additionally, we take note of some of the excellent projects you've highlighted today. The United States is pleased to have provided financial assistance for some of these, notably, the biometric passport program. We look forward to continuing to provide support to other worthwhile extra-budgetary projects in the coming year as well.

In the Second Dimension, the two-year project to improve the functional capabilities of the Uzbek Financial Intelligence Unit has been exceptionally important and beneficial. Similarly, your efforts to strengthen institutional and legal capacity of governmental agencies and civil society in good governance are essential. Projects of this kind will pay dividends for years to come in Uzbekistan.

In the Human Dimension, we hope that the project to enhance the Ombudsperson Institution will improve the quality of human rights protection throughout the country. We were disappointed, however, to hear reports that the component of the project dealing with the Ombudsman for the Penitentiary system is likely to be discontinued. The Project Coordinator's cooperation with the ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs, and especially in developing the capacities of the Department of Human Rights Protection, are good examples of building on the niche expertise and strengths that the OSCE has to offer. We hope to see increased implementation of the legislation aimed at liberalizing the legal system and the new plans for

furthering democratization in Uzbekistan. We see these as presenting very good opportunities for even greater cooperation between the Government and the Project Coordinator.

While the steps mentioned are fittingly recognized as being in the right direction, and while the U.S.-Uzbekistan relationship continues to improve, there, nonetheless, remain issues of grave concern for the development of human rights in Uzbekistan on which I must comment. Chief among these is the state of religious freedom in Uzbekistan. Particularly worrying has been the number of arrests of religious adherents and representatives, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and other Protestants, in addition to the members of some Islamic groups. Reports of raids on the homes and places of worship of non-majority religious groups are followed too often by reports of religious literature being confiscated and destroyed, or bans on the importation of religious publications. There have been reports of pastors and imams not practicing majority religions being imprisoned or fined. These practices are not in keeping with Uzbekistan's OSCE commitments on religious freedom and should not continue.

Similarly, the reports that the Project Coordinator's Office is unable to work freely with the civil society partners of its own choosing is not in keeping with Uzbekistan's OSCE commitments and inhibits the ability of the Project Coordinator to achieve his mandate.

Finally, I note that the United States continues to have concerns about the suppression of the media in Uzbekistan, about reports of torture in detention, the lack of due process, and the use of child labor in the cotton harvest. I regret that again this year psychologist Maxim Popov remains incarcerated for working to decrease the incidence of AIDS in Uzbekistan, and journalist Dilmurod Sayid remains jailed for writing about official corruption.

Ambassador Venczel, each year your report has been able to point to improvements in the relationship between the OSCE and the Government of Uzbekistan. We sincerely hope this trend will continue. We look forward to a strong and continued exchange with Uzbekistan, and to more success and progress from you, Ambassador, and your dedicated and hard working staff in Tashkent in the months ahead.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.