



Press Conference with Assistant Secretaries Jones and Craner

A. Elizabeth Jones, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Lorne Craner, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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Uzbek Foreign Minister Safaev: Allow me to welcome you all distinguished representatives of the media, Ms. Jones, Mr. Craner, Mr. Appleton. We are pleased to see you all in this press conference. We are very pleased to welcome the State Department delegation in Uzbekistan today. Today we held the fourth straight meeting with Ms. Jones this year. This has once again shown how developed the Uzbek-U.S. political dialogue is, the character of frank dialogue between us. Ms. Jones has held a series of meetings at our government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Justice Ministry, Ministry of Economics, and finally a very productive long meeting was held with Uzbek President Islam Abduganievich Karimov. We also welcome Ms. Jones' colleague Mr. Craner – it is his 4th visit to Uzbekistan. Each visit of Mr. Craner to Uzbekistan has been a landmark step towards protection of human rights, promotion of democratic reforms, and we believe that this time too his visit will not be an exception. During the meetings the parties discussed bilateral relations, the regional situation, cooperation in the global combat against terrorism, and other important issues. And most importantly, the process of implementation of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership signed between Uzbekistan and United States has been appraised and the parties also evaluated the prospects of this partnership and relating issues have been discussed. Concluding my opening statement I would like to say that these Uzbek-U.S. political consultations once again proved the mutual interest and the aspiration of two sides to deepen the cooperation in the future. We thank Ms. Jones and Mr. Craner for their visits and express hope to continue our political dialogue in the future. Now I'd like to turn the floor to the Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones.

Assistant Secretary Jones: Thank you very much Mr. Minister. We are very happy to be here. It was two years ago that we signed the Strategic framework agreement between the United States and Uzbekistan. That agreement outlined all of the many-many areas that comprised the Strategic partnership that we have with Uzbekistan. The U.S. Embassy in Tashkent is very active in promoting each and every one of those tasks. And the visit of Assistant Secretary Craner and myself right now is meant to take stock of how we are doing in promoting each of those issues but also to press hard for continued progress in each of the areas that is addressed in the Strategic Framework Document. The important point for us is that we are able to see progress in each of these areas and we have a very clear roadmap, very clear sense of how to achieve progress on the remaining elements of the Document. I look forward to addressing your questions, but first I'd like to ask Assistant Secretary Lorne Craner to say a few words.

Assistant Secretary Craner: Thank you. This is my forth visit to Uzbekistan. I first came here a little over two years ago. Obviously, I am interested in the portion of the Strategic Framework Document dealing with Uzbekistan's political development. I was able to meet, in addition to Ministers from the government and the President, with members of civil society and also the human rights advisor to the government. And with members of U.S. NGOs who are here to assist in that development. I look forward to taking your questions. Thank you.

Q: Turkiston-press news agency: I have a question for Ms. Jones. Can you comment on your conversation with President Islam Karimov in more detail, and Mr. Craner if you could comment the content of you conversation with NGOs. Thank you.

A/S Jones: Yes. With President Karimov I discussed the vision that the United States has for Uzbekistan, which I outlined to Congress a couple of weeks ago. And that vision sees Uzbekistan as an independent, stable, and prosperous country with its economy as an engine for growth in the region. And with that overview we discussed in more detail the importance of registering political parties and of the government assisting political parties to register. We talked about the importance of Uzbekistan having reached convertibility of its currency. As that being the first step of further economic reforms particularly including trade liberalization. We talked about the importance of strategic work on military bases that United States in Uzbekistan undertake. That is particularly important in the Global War on Terrorism. Let me talk about the importance of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan having opened for two-way traffic, trade, people, etc; the bridge in Termez.

A/S Craner: In my meetings with a number of U.S. NGOs that are working here we discussed human rights, political, and legal developments here in Uzbekistan. A variety of human rights issues brought up; particularly interest in the follow-up on the visit of Mr. van Boven. Mr. van Boven's interest as the UN's Special Rapporteur on Torture being to help eliminate that here. We also discussed some of the nascent political parties here in Uzbekistan and the lead-up to the elections next year.

Q: UPI: My question is to Ms. Jones and to Mr. Craner. This year one journalist was sentenced to four years in prison. Two were beaten and robbed. And three were beaten. Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry refused accreditation to journalists writing about human rights violations. Moreover yesterday a list of those journalists was published in the Internet called the "List of Journalists Not Accredited by the Uzbek Foreign Ministry". The list includes 20 journalists including six journalists working for U.S. media. For example I am on this list. And I was not accredited recently by Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry. Moreover yesterday someone published details about how the National Security Service spies on and write tapes about such journalists using devices being supplied by the United States. Will the State Department be inquiring into that? Thank you.

A/S Craner: You can be assured we won't be indifferent. I have not seen the list but we would be happy to give it to our friends in the Foreign Ministry so they can look into this issue. We have consistently stood not only for freedom of the press for foreigners operating in Uzbekistan but also for Uzbeks operating here. I would note that the government about a year ago lifted the prior censorship. I understand there is still a great deal of self-censorship by the media here but we will encourage you all of you who are here today to report accurately on what we say.

Q: Ozod Ovoz website: I'd like to ask Ms. Elizabeth Jones and Mr. Craner two questions. During the meeting with Karimov did you discuss or not the issue related to the daughter of President Karimov - Gulnara Karimova? As it is known before your visit to Tashkent you, Ms. Jones, said that in Tashkent you would discuss this issue. And second question: was the issue of releasing political prisoners discussed with Mr. Karimov, in particular the release of the famous writer Mamadali Mahmudov?

A/S Jones: On the question of the President's daughter I did not discuss that with the President I've discussed it elsewhere and hope of finding the resolution.

A/S Craner: On the subject of political prisoners – that was the topic that has come up in all of our meetings but it is also a topic that our Embassy pursues on a constant basis. And our position is that all of those who may be in prison simply because of their beliefs or their writing should be released.

Q: Golos Rossiya Radio: My question is addressed to all of you: in your negotiations today, and in tomorrow's meetings in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan is there in some degree of historical presence of Russia here in region. Do you consider the Russian factor in your current visits?

A/S Jones: Our primary purpose today and tomorrow in Tashkent and rest of the week in other countries in Central Asia is to discuss bilateral relations and regional relations as it relates to the Central Asia countries as well as the region including Afghanistan. That's our primary focus. There are many things in our bilateral agenda with each of these countries, many of which we've already touched on today. The role of Russia may or may not be a subject of our discussion, that's not my primary purpose, it's not our primary purpose in our meetings. We focus on bilateral issues.

Q: Le Suar newspaper: Can you comment on the recent statement of U.S. State Department on the existing real danger posed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Central Asian newspaper.

A/S Jones: The statement made by whom?

Le Suar: Made by you

A/S Jones: The one that I made in Congress?

Le Suar: Yes.

A/S Jones: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is on the terrorism list of the United States. It's an organization we treat as a terrorist organization. It has been a dangerous organization. I don't know what remains, that is something that we watch very closely.

Q: BBC: My question is for Elizabeth Jones. You talk about vision I wondered if you could give me a big picture view where Uzbekistan fits into the new U.S. security map and how you expect that place to change or develop in the time to come?

A/S Jones: Let me put it this way. Uzbekistan occupies, by virtue of its geography, a strategic position in the continent. But more importantly, because of its reliability, because of its desire to work in a collaborative way with the United States, it has enhanced its strategic importance in the region. But as much as we appreciate our ability to use Karshi Khanabad airbase, it is extremely important to the United States as well that we be able to work with Uzbekistan to enhance political and human rights priorities and behavior, and to work collaboratively with Uzbekistan to develop a prosperous economically viable country in which people have jobs and have good economic prosperity. And we have been heartened by the progress that's been made, as Assistant Secretary Craner mentioned, it was very good policy for Uzbekistan to invite the UN Rapporteur on Torture to come to investigate the situation with torture. Uzbekistan has now developed a work plan and it's working vigorously on that work plan. The same goes for the economic sphere where convertibility has now been accomplished. There is still any number of very serious threats in the region from narcotics, from terrorism, from weapons, trafficking in persons and all of those need to be addressed and we think we have a good partner in working on many of these issues with Uzbekistan.

Q: Radio Liberty (Russian service): You said that you discussed with President Karimov the issues of the military cooperation. Could you specify what will be the amount of military assistance in the coming new year?

A/S Jones: No, I can't. That hasn't been decided yet. That's an issue that the Congress focuses on very intensively. We make a request and they determine based on all of the other requests, based on their review on the situation between Uzbekistan and the United States, whether the assistance that we have requested is appropriate. I have every belief that we will get the kind of assistance that we need in order to promote the programs that are the most appropriate for our bilateral relationship.

Q: Radio Liberty (Tajik service): Can you please say why your current visit does not include Tajikistan? Thank you.

A/S Jones: It actually does include Tajikistan. We will be in Dushanbe later this week.

Q: Ria-novosti: My question to Ms. Jones. Despite the great distance between the United States and Uzbekistan many U.S. officials including you name Uzbekistan as the "area of strategic vital interests of the United States". Could you say in detail what stands behind this imposing expression of "strategic vital interests"?

A/S Jones: Yes. I'd be glad to. Partly because of its physical position but more because of its attitude we are able to work with Uzbekistan to counter the numerous threats that we see in the world. We have programs that are focused on countering terrorism, on working against narcotics trafficking, trying to assure against trafficking in persons, programs like that, because so much travels through and across Uzbekistan because of its physical position. But at the same time there can be no future, no prospective for that kind of cooperation without there being an increased ability of the people of Uzbekistan to have a say in their future. We think that is a critical element of stability. Not only in terms of political choice and political participation but also in terms of jobs, which requires job creation, it requires investment, it requires improving the investment climate, it requires improving the ability to deal in commercial terms along international norms. So that's why we include in our Strategic Framework all of those issues because they all together formed a strategic relationship. It's not a one-issue relationship.

Q: BBC: I'd like to pick up one more detail that you mentioned before. You said that good work was going ahead on the work plan on torture and I wanted Mr. Safaev or anybody else who would like to answer could give us some detail what's been done?

A/S Craner: What I have seen the government do is to deconstruct all the recommendations that Mr. van Boven made, to take the report apart. They have then brought together all the ministries that are responsible, have any responsibility for the prison system or the justice system, and they have tried to figure out solutions to each of the problems that were outlined in the report. And then develop a timetable for implementation of those recommendations. And finally put it out for the thoughts of the people from elsewhere in the world, from Europe and elsewhere where upon a new draft has been done that in many ways accelerates the plan. You can never guarantee an end to the practice of torture because it comes from the mind of an individual. But if this plan were fully implemented you would put in place the kind of safeguards that would virtually eliminate torture here in Uzbekistan.

Minister Safaev: So the main point is to institutionalize the prevention of the torture in the prisons. I'd like just to tell you that now we have made amendments in the legal framework, now we have law, which addresses the issue of tortures. There is a special body – executive body – to monitor the process of preventing any kind of abuse of human rights in institutions like prisons and other detention institutions. We mean to create the mood or

atmosphere of intolerance towards any kind or any case of human rights violation. You know that many publications were released recently, showing that the government is very serious in fighting such kind of abuse of human rights in prisons. And at last we mean to expand international cooperation in this field. If in 2001 ICRC had access only 4 times to the prisons in Uzbekistan, during this year they 19 times visited the prisons in Uzbekistan. It shows the tendency. Lastly, Mr. van Boven or whoever will come to his position of UN Rapporteur on Torture has an open invitation to visit Uzbekistan once again and to see the progress in implementing their recommendations.

Q: VOA (Uzbek Service): My question is for Ms. Elizabeth Jones. In your speech in the U.S. Congress it was noted that Uzbekistan's harsh policy towards religious people serves to increase of number of radically minded people in the country. Has this subject been reflected in your meetings today with Uzbek officials and did Uzbekistan's government come up with any proposals in this regard?

A/S Jones: We talked about it in terms of treatment of religious life and religious groups in Uzbekistan. I think we had good conversation about it. It's something that I believe very strongly that action to silence voices whether on religious ground or political ground simply put those voices underground and make them more dangerous. Whereas registering political parties and registering religious groups allows the kind of dialogue and kind of diverse conversation that is appropriate in a country like Uzbekistan.

Minister Safaev: I'd like to make a comment and correction to your question, there are no problems or issues regarding to the free practice, free unimpeded practice of religion in Uzbekistan. More than 82% of the Uzbekistan's population are Muslims and there are no issues between them and the government. And only those who have violated the laws or those who have broken the constitutional order using their religious beliefs as a pretext will be prosecuted.

Q: BBC (Uzbek service): First, I have very short question to Mr. Safaev, and then I have a question to Mr. Craner. Mr. Safaev, according to you after the visit of Mr. van Boven to Uzbekistan the government has developed the concrete plan of action to prevent torture. Does it mean that Uzbek government acknowledges Mr. van Boven's report that torture in Uzbekistan has a systematic character?

Minister Safaev: Uzbekistan only acknowledges the existence of such a problem. And the issue is about acknowledging the need to combat such occurrences. As Mr. Craner noted the issues of torture exists in every society and unfortunately it is embedded in the human nature. And one example sometimes people say that in Uzbekistan this situation has grown worse. This is not so, and it would be inaccurate to say that 5-6 years ago situation was better. The situation has got more transparent and society now is aware of more facts in this regard. We think transparency is first step to address this problem.

Q: BBC (Uzbek service): Thank you Mr. Safaev. I have question to Mr. Craner. Will the U.S. promote the participation of opposition parties in the next parliamentary elections. If yes, what steps will the U.S. take to ensure free and fair parliamentary elections next year?

A/S Craner: We are interested in seeing opposition parties be able to participate in the elections because absent opposition parties you really can't have an election. And to that end I would note that to my knowledge both Birlik and the Agrarian party have been allowed to hold congresses though they have not yet been registered. Obviously we are interested in seeing free and open elections here like we are anywhere else in the world. And we believe not because we believe that elections are the beginning and end of democracy, but because we also think that they can be a vehicle to allow the development of things that the government has said that it wanted; the development of civil society for example. President Karimov gave a speech this summer about how he wanted to enhance the role of the parliament. And obviously having a greater degree of discussion within the parliament that would resort from opposition parties having seats there would enhance the role of the parliament. So we have an interest in elections here but I think the government should as and does as well.

Q: AP: You said that you talked about registering political parties here. You talked with officials in Uzbekistan. What kind of response did you get? Are they willing to do so or not? And another question we visited – me and another journalist – visited in prison journalist Ruslan Sharipov who was jailed for sodomy charges but he claims that he is not guilty of that. And from talking to him in prison we got an impression that it was a totally fabricated case. He told us that he had a gas mask was put on his head. He was threatened, he was tortured and he had people put in his cell who threatened him, he was even forced to admit that he was a foreign spy, all sorts of things. And the police department which dealt with him was an anti-terrorism department. Does it have to deal with journalism with sexual crime cases? It's a big question. So it is a highly publicized case. There are allegations that torture has been used against him but will there be an investigation or will anything be done about it? I would like to address this question maybe to Mr. Safaev and also others if you are aware.

Minister Safaev: In regard with the case of Ruslan Sharipov – he was convicted not with sodomy but pedophilia. It's clear from the case, there was medical expertise that he had sexual relations with two youngsters under the age of 16. The parents of those two kids are very serious about him. And they think that the case that he is an independent journalist cannot excuse him for having sexual harassment of two youngsters. His case was not under the auspices of terrorism. Not at all. It was done by specific department dealing with such kinds of cases. Moreover from the first day the office of General Prosecutor took day to day control and monitoring over the investigation and court issue. He had two lawyers who monitored every aspects of his case. The hearings were closed because such kind of issues related to sexual abuse are supposed to be closed. They've taken into account the sensitivity of the case. Since he is an independent journalist and you have correctly said that the case is drawing high publicity his condition we control every day. He now works at the art workshop at Tawaksay penitentiary facility. Since there is such high level of monitoring from international community we will continue to monitor his conditions and so far we haven't noticed any violation of law on his case.

A/S Craner: On the Sharipov case, we have been, the Embassy has been able to visit him on a number of occasions. I don't know if he did what he was accused of or not, but I think it points to the larger problem that the judicial system here needs to be worked on so that it has a high degree of credibility in these and other cases. You can't say for any country that you are absolutely certain once somebody has been through a trial that they are guilty or innocent but in many systems you have a high degree of confidence. And that's part of wider assistance here which has been accepted by the government which includes working with judges and working with lawyers to improve the civil code and the judicial administration here. We do believe given all that that he should be amnestied. On the subject of political parties it was clear to me from talking to a number of people in government that parties that are able to meet the registration requirements will be registered. And we make clear that we would like to see that happen.

A/S Jones: Thank you all very much for joining us tonight.

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