

USA: Hillary Clinton and Michel Obama to present the award of courage to Mutabar Tajibaeva

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Mutabar Tajibaeva

On March 11, at the solemn ceremony in Washington DC the US State Secretary Hillary Clinton and first lady Michel Obama will present «International Women Courage» award to the representatives of eight countries: Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Guatemala, Iraq, Malaysia, Nigeria and Yemen.

The annual International Women of Courage was established in March 2007 and awards the outstanding women across the world for their contribution in the area of human rights protection

and feministic achievements.

This year list of nominees includes the prominent Uzbek human rights activist Mutabar Tajibaeva, the Director of Global Rights NGO office for Afghanistan Vajma Frog and Russian Mother's Right non-profit organization Head Veronika Marchenko.

Ferghana.ru received the speech of Mutabar Tajibaeva to US Democrats in Awarding Ceremony of «International Woman of Courage» Award and presents the full text below.

«Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I have been looking forward to this meeting with a special excitement. I am overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude for your support and recognition. I did not expect any award.

I sincerely believe that by defending the principles of freedom and human rights, it will be possible to change for the better the lives of the citizens of Uzbekistan, and by this to change the attitude of the Uzbek government toward its people. I am grateful that I have a unique opportunity to address to representatives of the American people, and to tell you about the concerns shared by me and my Uzbek colleagues.

My work as a human rights activist is based on my own bitter experiences, as well those of many of my colleagues in Uzbekistan. Today, Uzbekistan is in a state of lawlessness. The judicial system is extraordinarily weak. The authorities continue to practice widespread repression, violence and torture. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and the freedom to gather peacefully are categorically not observed. Human rights activists are systematically persecuted across the country. All of this results in shocking statistics with regard to the number of political prisoners and victims of torture in Uzbekistan, many of them people I know personally.

I know that many people in Uzbekistan were forced by the authorities to give evidence against me, and against the international human rights organizations that criticize the government's mass violations of human rights. From this platform today I would like to express gratitude, from myself personally as well as on behalf of Uzbek civil society, to Human Rights Watch, which has earned the special trust of our citizens. The Uzbek government has recently refused accreditation to Human Rights Watch's representative Igor Vorontsov. We believe that this is a serious obstacle for the dissemination of trustworthy information on the status of human rights in Uzbekistan, and I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to do the utmost in order that Human Rights Watch may be allowed to continue its work through its office in Uzbekistan.

Organizations like NED, Freedom House, NDI, IRI, Open Society Institute done invaluable efforts for development of civil society of Uzbekistan. For many years people of Uzbekistan can hear

independent views in Uzbekistan thanks for the work of Voice of America, RFE/RL.

I also want to thank my colleagues from the International Federation for Human Rights, Frontline and International League for Human Rights. Due to their efforts and support, Uzbek human rights activists are continuing their important mission under very repressive conditions, thus risking not only their lives, but also the lives of their relatives and loved ones. Great efforts are being made by Amnesty International to push for the release of prisoners of conscience. Their efforts have so far resulted in the release of hundreds of our activists. It is very important that the government of the United States of America remain highly engaged in monitoring the situation with human rights in Uzbekistan.

I would like underline names of several civil society activists in Uzbekistan who have been deprived of their freedom for long terms on fabricated charges. During all their years of imprisonment, they have been tortured, and attempts have been made to force them to change their beliefs. Many of them have serious health problems. I sincerely ask you to do what you can to secure the release of the following prisoners of conscience: Sanjar Umarov, co-founder of "Coalition of Sunshine Uzbekistan" who is very ill; the writer Mamadali Mahmudov, who has been in prison for 10 years; the founder of Uzbekistan's first opposition newspaper "Erk" Muhammad Bekjan, who also has been in prison for 10 years; former members of parliament Murad Juraev and Samandar Kukonov, who have spent 15 and 16 years in prison respectively; the head of human rights center "Mazlum" Azam Turgunov; member of democratic opposition party "Erk" Rashid Bekzhan, in prison for 10 years; the poet Yusuf Juma and his son Mashraba Yusupjon-ogly; Journalist Sali Abdurakhmanov, the member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan Azam Formonov, who is being held in the Jaslyk prison which is located on a former chemical weapons testing site; Alisher Karamatov, who suffers from TB and urgently needs qualified medical help; the member of the Human Rights Society "Ezgulik" Isroil Holdanov, who is physically disabled; and many others.

These are all deserving citizens of Uzbekistan, and now they need our help. I know this well, since I myself faced many serious challenges. I was imprisoned on false charges. The human rights organization I helped to found, club of "Ardent Hearts," has been under consistent and huge pressure by law enforcement bodies. They created false charges against our organization several times—charges which were formulated so as to give grounds to consider us an extremist organization. And after the Andijan massacre in 2005, the pressure on the people of Uzbekistan has considerably increased, and the crackdown is still continuing. I am still receiving messages telling me that I may be again deprived of freedom if I do not stop criticizing the current regime. Nevertheless, I continue my work, as I consider it important and necessary.

I was very pleased to know that the United States State department is going to award the "International Woman of Courage" award to me, as I consider this evidence interest in what I am doing. Under conditions of continuing pressure and threats, this award gives me reason for confidence. I was awarded the Martin Ennals award when I was in prison, when the authorities were trying to portray me as a criminal. The decision of the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights on awarding the human rights organization of the club "Ardent hearts" was announced during my visits in European Union countries. It was pleasant news on the eve of my operation.

I highly appreciate the opportunity to continue my work with the support of the international democratic community. I place a high value on the participation of the United States of America in efforts to support freedom and human rights in Uzbekistan, and this view is shared by all civil society workers in the country.

I am endlessly grateful to all those who believe in me and in what I do. I assure you that my activities in support of human rights will continue; as long as our "Ardent hearts" are beating we will defend the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We hope that that these principles become norms of life for Uzbek society.

I once again thank all who have shared these few minutes of happiness together with me today and who are not indifferent to the problems of Uzbek society».

Mutabar Tajibaeva