



human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

September 9, 2016

Randy W. Berry
Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
2201 C St, NW, Room 7802
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Special Envoy Berry:

At Human Rights First, we have been deeply concerned about the issues impacting the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community throughout Central Asia and the former Soviet Union. As you know, this has been a core focus for our LGBT Campaign and we have actively engaged with activists and NGOs to understand the problems they face and the solutions they recommend. We have also worked closely with U.S. leadership to ensure that these issues rise to and remain at the forefront of our nation's human rights agenda.

Over the past several years, Human Rights First has met on multiple occasions with human rights defenders from Central Asia, both in the region and in the United States. Our philosophy, which we know you share, is to recognize that people living in a specific place have the best strategies for achieving their goals. Our job is to assess how we can best support their plans and add value. During these same years we have regularly met with leaders throughout the U.S. government and have been pleased to note a growing interest in the region, exemplified most specifically in the ongoing C5+1 Initiative.

We were pleased to learn that you will soon be traveling to Kazakhstan to meet with government leaders and NGOs about the pressing needs of the LGBT community in that country, as well as to connect with activists from the region as a whole via teleconference. For change to occur, we believe it is essential that the United States continue its ongoing engagement, both through the normal channels of the embassies and with the appropriate regional staff, and also through your office and with a thematic focus on human rights.

Human rights violations against LGBT people, and impunity when violations occur, are unfortunately the daily reality in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. While homosexuality has been decriminalized in the first three of these countries, that does not mean that LGBT people can live in safety and equality. At Human Rights First, we are in regular contact with activists and NGOs who report ongoing issues of physical violence, extortion, and refusal of services. Members of the transgender community confirm these reports, and also document additional hurdles in accessing appropriate medical care and changing gender-specific documentation. We know that the influence of Russia plays a significant role in

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fomenting and maintaining this environment, in particular via the promotion of Russian-style propaganda laws.

We hope that you will use this opportunity to meet with government officials in Kazakhstan and to speak broadly about the negative impacts of discrimination of all kinds. In addition, we believe that your plans to meet with activists from around the region will help them understand the role that the United States can play in helping them achieve their goals.

We believe that change is possible in Central Asia, even if progress is likely to be slow. Brave activists are standing up to claim their basic rights and there are multiple opportunities for international solidarity to help bolster their efforts. Diplomatic missions such as this one are an essential component of this forward movement and we hope you will seek out every opportunity to help advance the cause of LGBT equality while in the region.

Please feel free to contact us if there is additional information we can provide or other ways that we can assist in this effort.

Sincerely,

Shawn Gaylord
Advocacy Counsel