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Summary record of the 3691st meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Tuesday, 3 March 2020, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Fathalla

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 40 of the Covenant
(continued)

Fifth periodic report of Uzbekistan (continued) (CCPR/C/UZB/5;
CCPR/C/UZB/Q/5; CCPR/C/UZB/RQ/5)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Uzbekistan took places at the Committee table.*
2. **Ms. Kran**, resuming her questions from the previous meeting, said that she would appreciate clarification as to whether a national investigation had been carried out into the events that had occurred in Andijon in 2005 and whether the State party intended to publish a report on its findings. In addition to the questions that she had already asked about the Government's plans to combat torture and ill-treatment, the Committee would welcome specific information on a number of cases in which individuals had been detained on politically motivated charges. Those included the cases of former diplomat Kadyr Yusupov, journalist Said-Abdulaziz Yusupov, former Procurator General Rashitjon Kadirov, brothers Ilhom and Rahim Ibodov, journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev, independent cleric Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, scholar Andrei Kubatin and soldier Ravshan Kosimov, all of whose complaints had been detailed in a report submitted to the Committee prior to the meeting by Human Rights Watch.
3. **Mr. Saidov** said that his delegation agreed with the Committee's observation that the Covenant could not be fully implemented in one fell swoop. The Government was nonetheless engaged in ongoing efforts to ensure that it fulfilled the commitments that the State party had taken on when it signed the Covenant.
4. The representatives of the Ombudsman's Office would be selected at the forthcoming meeting of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, scheduled to be held from 16 to 20 March 2020 in Geneva. According to the Ombudsman's secretariat, the Office received adequate funding from the Government to perform its mandated duties. The previous year, the Ombudsman had carried out 20 visits to prisons and 6 visits to places of pretrial detention and had conducted one-to-one interviews with a total of 248 inmates. The Office of the Ombudsman had also received 130 oral appeals concerning court judgments via its hotline, all of which had been referred to the Supreme Court.
5. As far as independent visits to correctional facilities were concerned, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief had visited Jasliq Prison in 2017 and, in 2019 alone, a total of 451 such visits to places of deprivation of liberty had been carried out in Uzbekistan, including to facilities in Tashkent and the Navoisky prison. Many of those visits had involved the participation of international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the German Agency for International Cooperation and Human Rights Watch.
6. With reference to the Committee's questions on corruption, it had been decided that the National Interdepartmental Anti-Corruption Commission did not have the required capacity to fulfil its mandate. An additional independent body had therefore been set up to look into corruption at all levels and report back to parliament and the President. It should nonetheless be noted that Uzbekistan had climbed five places in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index in 2019. The country participated in a total of 24 initiatives in which countries were ranked in accordance with how they performed in various fields, ranging from business to freedom of expression. The Government set great store by such rankings, which were considered to provide a useful and objective assessment of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan.
7. **Mr. Tashpulatov** said that, under article 221 of the Criminal Code, inmates' prison sentences could be extended for failing to follow the legitimate orders of prison officers, for hindering the work of prison officers or for disrupting the normal functioning of the institution in which they were housed. The article was fully compatible with international standards, and the Government had not contemplated its repeal, since that would have negative consequences for the operations of correctional facilities in the country. However, as shown in the replies to the Committee's list of issues, the annual number of criminal cases brought by the relevant authorities under article 221 had been steadily decreasing since 2016.

8. The new legislation on firearms that had been adopted in 2019 was designed to protect the general public and uphold public security. The new provisions set out the different types of firearms that were suitable for civilian and official use. For example, civilians were not permitted to use automatic firearms. The use of certain types of weaponry was restricted to public security and defence agents who had been assigned to protect senior officials or important cargo, to engage in hostilities or to perform other official tasks. So-called “civilian weapons” could not be carried during mass events in open places, such as demonstrations and marches, or at places where alcohol was freely available. A total of 34 firearm offences had been registered in his country during the reporting period.

9. The Counter-Extremism Act had been adopted in 2018 as part of the Government’s efforts to fulfil the country’s obligations as a signatory to the Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Countering Extremism. That law set out a series of measures that could be taken to address extremist acts, such as acts intended to destabilize the political or constitutional order, to seize power or to incite racial, religious or any other form of hatred, all of which were defined as offences under the Criminal Code. However, persons could be exempted from prosecution if they denounced their involvement, reported the organization in question to the Government and actively facilitated the prevention of the acts in question. In 2019, over a hundred criminal cases related to extremist activities had been investigated, resulting in the conviction of 139 individuals.

10. **Ms. Ataniyazova** said that the President had issued a decree in 2019 concerning the status of women and their involvement in all walks of life. The aim of the decree was to ensure the effective implementation of the national policy on women with a view to protecting their rights and interests, enhancing their role in society and increasing their participation in political life. The country’s local community associations, known as *mahallas*, had a central role to play in the implementation of that policy and were involved in the timely detection of problems facing women and the provision of legal and psychological assistance. On a related note, and thanks in part to support received from the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Gender Equality Commission had drafted a new strategy for the period from 2020 to 2030. That strategy, which was ready to be submitted for presidential approval, set out a list of priorities that included providing greater protection against domestic violence, upholding equal labour rights and ensuring social protection coverage for women and families. Following the most recent elections, the number of women in politics had approximately doubled at the national level and tripled at the district level. Moreover, around 150 women were currently members of the judiciary at various levels, which was a higher figure than had been cited by the Committee. Approximately 16 per cent of the representatives of regional *hokimiyats* (administrative bodies) were women, and that figure rose to 25 per cent for district *hokimiyats*.

11. The Government was closely monitoring all criminal cases involving the violation of women’s rights. The number of such cases had dropped year on year during the reporting period and, in the last year alone, had fallen by nearly a quarter. There were currently over 190 shelters for victims of domestic violence. Shelters had been established in every region of the country, including in the remotest districts, and a hotline had been set up for women seeking assistance. Over 20,000 women had contacted the shelters in 2019; over 2,000 had received medical aid and around 1,000 had received psychological support, while others had been provided with legal assistance.

12. **Mr. Saidov** said that the Government was of the opinion that the events of 2005 in Andijon had already been fully investigated and that any individuals who had committed criminal acts, whether terrorists or law enforcement officials, had been held to account. The European Union had initially imposed sanctions against his country in response to those incidents. However, the Government had cooperated fully with its representatives and, following two visits by European Union delegations, those sanctions had been lifted.

13. Combating torture was a government priority. Over the past 15 years, his country had held extensive discussions with organizations such as the Committee against Torture, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) on the subject of bringing Uzbek law into line with the provisions of the Convention against Torture. Having given careful consideration to all the recommendations received, the Government had adopted legislative changes in 2019 and considered that the definition of torture under article 235 of the Code

was now fully in line with article 1 (1) of the Convention. Parliament was also in the process of drafting a road map for giving effect to the recommendations that it had recently received from the Committee against Torture (CAT/C/UZB/CO/5). The delegation would submit detailed written information concerning the specific cases mentioned by Ms. Kran following the conclusion of the meeting.

14. The Government continued to introduce amendments in order to bring national law into line with international standards. When drafting such amendments, the Government focused on three elements. Firstly, it analysed existing legislative provisions to assess the extent to which the country's international commitments were already reflected in national law. Secondly, it sought out examples of best practice in other countries. Lastly, it drew on its own experiences on the national front in order to ensure that all amendments would result in relevant and effective change.

15. **Mr. Bulkan** said that he had been greatly heartened by the head of the delegation's restatement of the State party's commitment to its Covenant obligations and its constructive attitude. However, the State party's best efforts notwithstanding, reputable NGOs and intergovernmental organizations had indicated that the use of forced labour was still widespread in Uzbekistan. In fact, it was reported that thousands of persons in both the public and private sectors were forced to pick cotton each year. He wished to invite the delegation to comment on those claims and would like to know whether any measures were planned or were under way to eliminate forced labour in the cotton harvest. One NGO had alleged that the Government tolerated forced labour and that its actions served to perpetuate and even incentivize such practices. For example, local authorities were apparently penalized if they did not meet certain quotas during the cotton harvest, and the State party's financial and human resources were often reallocated from public services to the cotton industry. In the light of those claims, he wished to know whether the State party intended to address the structural issues affecting the cotton sector. The Human Rights Committee would also welcome further information on any measures that had been taken to ensure that local authorities had the necessary financial and human resources to meet their cotton production quotas. Clarification as to whether any steps had been taken to reform the quota system, or to eliminate it altogether, would be of particular interest.

16. He was troubled by the apparent lack of transparency when it came to prosecuting senior public officials for offences relating to forced labour and publishing the names of those who were convicted of such crimes. He wished to know how the State party intended to ensure that all persons, including high-ranking public officials, were held to account. Updated statistics on the number of senior public officials who had been investigated, prosecuted and convicted for having used forced labour would be gratefully received.

17. He would be interested to learn what measures had been implemented to improve conditions for cotton pickers, who reportedly faced appalling working and living conditions, such as overcrowded housing, insufficient hygiene facilities and the absence of separate facilities for women and men. In the same vein, he would like to know what steps had been taken to prevent deaths from occurring in connection with work on the cotton harvest and what efforts had been made to ensure that such incidents were thoroughly investigated. It would be helpful if the delegation could provide data on any relevant investigations and prosecutions, their outcomes and the compensation awarded to victims' families. In addition to forced labour in the cotton industry, the Committee had received reports that public sector employees, such as teachers and health-care workers, were forced to carry out public maintenance tasks under threat of salary cuts, disciplinary measures and dismissal. What action was the State party taking to eliminate that practice?

18. **Ms. Pazartzis**, referring to paragraphs 175 to 178 of the State party's replies to the list of issues (CCPR/C/UZB/RQ/5), said that she welcomed the State party's efforts to simplify the procedures for Uzbek citizens to obtain temporary or permanent residency permits, or *propiska*, when moving to Tashkent from other regions for work, along with the steps taken to do away with administrative penalties for companies employing persons without such a permit. Despite those efforts, information from alternative sources indicated that it remained difficult for persons living in areas outside Tashkent and other major cities to obtain a valid residency permit, thus restricting their ability to seek and find employment and housing in larger cities. She invited the delegation to comment on those reports and on the impact of the measures it had taken so far.

19. She noted that an exit visa was no longer required in order to travel abroad. However, in practice, citizens were reportedly still required to apply for permission from the authorities to leave the country, which could be refused. She wished to know on what grounds such applications could be refused, which authority processed them and whether those decisions were subject to appeal or judicial review. The delegation was also invited to comment on reports that the authorities continued to impose travel restrictions on released prisoners who had been convicted on politically motivated charges, including those travelling abroad for urgent medical treatment.

20. Regarding the right to freedom of expression, she would be interested in learning more about proposals to amend articles 139 and 140 of the Criminal Code, which concerned the offences of defamation and insult, and, in particular, whether consideration was being given to the possible decriminalization of those offences. She noted that the Government had restored access to a number of independent media websites. She was concerned, however, by reports that the Government retained significant control over the media. She would therefore like to know whether access to all independent media and information websites had been restored and whether media outlets considered to be promoting “hateful content and extremist propaganda” could still be blocked pursuant to Decree No. 555 on mass communications. Lastly, with reference to paragraph 216 of the State party’s replies, she would be keen to learn more about the sphere of action of the Mass Communications Centre. In particular, she wondered which of its staff had the authority to suspend or revoke media licences and restrict Internet access and whether decisions to revoke licences were subject to judicial review.

21. **Ms. Sancin**, referring to the adoption of a presidential decree on the procedure for granting political asylum (CCPR/C/UZB/RQ/5, para. 179), said that she would be grateful for information on its implementation, including up-to-date statistics, disaggregated by gender, on the number of applications received and the percentages of those applications that had been accepted or rejected. She wished to commend the State party on the measures it had taken to reduce the risk of statelessness for children and welcomed the information provided by the delegation regarding the introduction of the new Citizenship Act. She wished to know whether, under that Act, it was still possible for Uzbek citizenship to be revoked in the event that a citizen who lived abroad for a prolonged period of time failed to register with an Uzbek consulate.

22. With reference to the recommendations made during the State party’s universal periodic review in 2018, she wished to know whether Uzbekistan intended to become a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In that connection, she would appreciate updated information on the steps being taken to establish a national system to guarantee access to asylum procedures for all persons in need of international protection and to provide adequate safeguards against harassment, arbitrary detention, deportation and refoulement.

23. Regarding the right to a fair trial and the independence of the judiciary, she wondered whether there were plans to abolish the requirement for lawyers to be recertified every three years and, with reference to paragraph 203 of the State party’s replies to the list of issues, whether information could be provided on the composition of the assessment boards responsible for granting licences to practice law. She would welcome an account of how the State party intended to deal with complaints by lawyers regarding violations of their clients’ human rights by members of law enforcement agencies. It would also be helpful if the delegation could provide statistics and other information on the use of alternative measures to the detention and imprisonment of juvenile offenders and could furnish clarification on the status of the bill on free legal aid, which, in her understanding, was intended to guarantee non-discriminatory, free and effective access to quality legal assistance to all persons without sufficient means to engage legal counsel.

24. She noted that the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of OSCE had raised concerns that the bill on rallies, meetings and demonstrations was inconsistent with international standards and had suggested a number of amendments. She wished to know whether the State party intended to introduce those amendments, which would abolish the current system of requiring prior authorization for holding peaceful assemblies, remove the seemingly unjustified restrictions on the times and locations where assemblies could be held, introduce a comprehensive definition of peaceful assemblies and ensure that the national guard or other military personnel were not allowed to take part in the policing of assemblies.

Lastly, she wished to invite the delegation to comment on reports of the arrest, detention and punishment of activists for organizing or participating in peaceful protests, such as in the cases of 30 women who had been involved in a peaceful protest in July 2018 and of Irina Zaidman and Maria Legler, who had organized a peaceful gathering in June 2017. She would appreciate it if the delegation could comment on what it saw as the legitimate aim, necessity and proportionality of such arrests and sanctions.

25. **Mr. Ben Achour**, referring to the preliminary observations made by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers following his visit to the State party in September 2019, said he was aware that the Special Rapporteur had noted a number of positive developments in relation to the independence of judges. However, the Special Rapporteur had also raised concerns about the criteria and procedure used for the selection of judges; the lack of security of tenure for judges; the extremely broad powers exercised by court chairpersons in the selection, promotion, evaluation and discipline of judges; and the politicization and lack of independence of the Prosecution Service and the Prosecutor General. He therefore wished to hear more about the situation of the judiciary in the State party. With reference to paragraphs 182 to 191 of the State party's replies to the list of issues, he had been particularly struck by the extent to which the political authorities seemed to be involved in the selection and appointment of judges to the Supreme Judicial Council, which, in his view, suggested that the judiciary lacked genuine independence from the executive branch. He would also be interested to know more about the criteria employed by the Higher Judicial Council when it came to selecting judges for reappointment and, in particular, how the criteria relating to the "stability of the judicial decisions" handed down by judges and "public opinion of their professional work" were applied in practice. Information on the composition of the Judges Higher Qualification Board and the procedures it followed when imposing disciplinary measures on judges would be helpful.

26. With reference to paragraph 22 of the Committee's concluding observations on the State party's fourth periodic report (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4), he would like to know what measures had been taken to bring the laws and practices relating to the freedom of religion and belief into compliance with article 18 of the Covenant. He wondered what reasons could account for the delay in drafting a bill on freedom of conscience and religious organizations, which had been in development for some five years, and whether the use of headscarves in public places was prohibited. Lastly, with reference to paragraph 208 of the State party's replies, he would appreciate specific information on the reasons why the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious organization had repeatedly been denied.

27. **Ms. Kran** said that the Committee would be interested to learn about the Government's response to the criticism that had reportedly been levelled at the draft code on NGOs and non-profit organizations. It would be helpful to know whether the apparently burdensome legal, administrative and financial registration requirements for NGOs would be removed or streamlined. She failed to understand how the requirement of de facto approval from the Ministry of Justice for travel abroad and for the receipt of funding was seen to be compatible with the operation of a vibrant civil society and would like to invite the delegation to comment on that subject. It would be useful to know whether the Government intended to make the draft code public in order to allow for input from civil society and experts and what steps had been taken to ensure that the new code would be aligned with international standards.

28. Despite the State party's assertion that fees for registering NGOs had been reduced and documentation requirements eased, 44 non-profit NGOs and 4 international NGOs had reportedly been denied registration between 2015 and mid-2018 on the grounds of their failure to meet the legal requirements. The Committee would be grateful to obtain additional information in that regard. The delegation might also wish to comment on reports that officials discouraged the registration of new organizations that were concerned with politically sensitive issues and to describe the means of recourse available to NGOs that felt that registration had been wrongly denied. Given that NGOs were required to provide advance notice of meetings or events, it would be helpful to learn what safeguards were in place to ensure that such requirements did not result in the improper restriction and monitoring of their activities.

29. The delegation might wish to indicate what had been done to remove excessive legal and administrative requirements for the registration of political parties and to ensure that registration procedures were not being used to suppress political opposition. It would also be

useful to know what measures had been taken to rein in the reportedly far-reaching powers of the Ministry of Justice with regard to the activities of political parties. Given the reported irregularities, absence of genuine competition and persecution of opposition supporters in the 2019 general elections, information about plans to prevent such problems in future elections would be appreciated. Did the Government plan to remove some of the restrictions on the right to stand for election? The Committee would also be interested to hear the State party's response to reports that persons with visual impairments had been barred from standing for local elections in the Mirabad District of Tashkent. Additional information about any steps taken to ensure the independence of lower-level commissions would also be welcome. Finally, she would like to know if the State party intended to lift the prohibition on private funding as a means of fostering political pluralism.

The meeting was suspended at 11.35 and resumed at 11.55 a.m.

30. **Mr. Lapasov** (Uzbekistan) said that, as a result of the Government's close engagement with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in recent years, his country had made remarkable strides in the application of international labour standards, especially in the cotton industry. The ILO report on third-party monitoring of child labour and forced labour during the 2019 cotton harvest, which had drawn on the results of over 7,000 unannounced field interviews with cotton pickers, had found that the Government of Uzbekistan did not engage in the systematic use of child labour or adult forced labour and that the recruitment of health professionals, teachers and students had been discontinued. Several years earlier, in a non-legislative resolution on the extension of bilateral trade in textiles, the European Parliament had recognized the progress made in that area.

31. Given its importance to global players, the cotton industry would certainly remain in the spotlight. ILO, the Uzbek German Forum on Human Rights and others were valuable partners in the country's efforts to monitor the situation, identify priorities and take remedial measures. The value of such cooperation was recognized by senior government officials, and any outstanding issues in that area would be tackled in cooperation with the country's international partners and civil society.

32. **Ms. Ataniyazova** (Uzbekistan) said that a series of key decisions on additional measures to combat the use of forced labour had been adopted in recent years, including a Cabinet of Ministers decision of 10 May 2018 on additional measures for the elimination of forced labour and a presidential decree of August 2018 on measures for improving the structure of labour governance bodies and for strengthening the system for the protection of labour rights and occupational safety and health. In the period from 2015 to 2019, 3,799 communications relating to labour law violations had been received. In 2019 alone, those communications had resulted in the imposition of administrative sanctions on 259 individuals. Around 100 managers had been sanctioned, 30 of them by dismissal. In addition, pursuant to a 2018 presidential decree on the responsibility of political leaders and State officials for the eradication of forced labour, the head of the Agriculture, Water Resources and Food Division had been removed from his post. Between 2017 and 2019, the Labour Inspectorate had organized more than 12,500 briefings for over 300,000 individuals on issues such as the prevention of forced labour, labour legislation, ILO conventions and the total prohibition of forced adult labour and all child labour. Some 300 labour inspectors and 500 officials from the public prosecutor's office and other government agencies, along with trade union representatives, had participated in training activities organized in cooperation with the ILO International Training Centre in Turin. A total of approximately 7,000 individuals had been trained in recruitment practices for the 2018 cotton harvest and another 400 for the 2019 harvest. The Government of Uzbekistan had ratified 17 ILO conventions, including the 8 fundamental conventions, and intended to accede to a further 7 conventions during the year. A national commission on combating human trafficking and forced labour had been established in 2019. In February 2019, several senior officials had attended a meeting convened by the global Cotton Campaign coalition with the aim of establishing mutually agreed criteria for assessing progress towards the elimination of forced labour and mechanisms for future cooperation with the coalition.

33. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that the most fundamental institutional changes undertaken in his country had been the State's withdrawal from the cotton industry and its transfer to the private sector, which was an important step on the way to a full transition to a market economy.

34. **Mr. Tashpulatov** (Uzbekistan) said that the presidential decree of May 2017 on the procedure for granting political asylum guaranteed the rights of refugees, but no applications for political asylum had been received since then. Under the new law on citizenship, the nearly 50,000 persons who had been residing in Uzbekistan continuously since 1995 would automatically be granted citizenship. In 2019, 13,697 citizenship applications had been received, and 9,707 of them had been granted. By comparison, only 482 residents had been granted citizenship between 1991 and 2016.

35. As regarded freedom of movement, the President had recently highlighted the Government's commitment to promoting the development of the regions, ensuring decent living conditions and speeding up the urbanization process. Parliament had been tasked with considering questions relating to the liberalization of restrictions on movement and the residence registration system (*propiska*), and a working group had been set up to develop legislation providing for the elimination of that system altogether. Also, as of 1 April 2020, people would be able to purchase property in the city of Tashkent without having a *propiska* permit. In an effort to simplify passport control and exit procedures, the issuance of permits in the form of passport stickers for travel abroad had been discontinued and replaced by biometric passports. More than 1 million biometric passports had been issued to date. Several categories of persons were subject to travel restrictions. Those categories included: individuals engaged in ongoing criminal proceedings; persons subject to non-custodial sentences or on parole; persons who had failed to obey a court order; persons who had committed identity fraud; and persons suspected of having committed an offence abroad.

36. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that the *propiska* system was a legacy of the Soviet era and was to be abolished. Uzbek legislation provided for the elimination of statelessness, and all children born in Uzbekistan were automatically granted Uzbek citizenship, regardless of their parents' nationality. The Government was assessing the possibility of ratifying the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Uzbekistan had become a full-fledged member of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2019.

37. **Mr. Lapasov** (Uzbekistan) said that the reasons for which a person could lose his or her Uzbek citizenship included, among others: if the person had joined the military service or a political party of a foreign State; if a person permanently residing abroad had, without good reason, failed to register with an Uzbek consulate within seven years (as compared with three years under the previous law); if a person had acquired citizenship on the basis of deliberately false information or forged documents; and if a person had acquired the citizenship of a foreign State.

38. The Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers had visited Uzbekistan at the invitation of the Government. Recognizing the need to reform the justice system and grant greater independence to lawyers, the Government had sought an independent assessment from an impartial expert in order to help identify gaps and possible remedies. The report of the Special Rapporteur, the full version of which would become available in June 2020, contained a thorough analysis of the situation and a series of recommendations. The document would be used to inform the development of a road map for giving effect to the recommendations contained therein.

39. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers had stated at a press conference that his aim was not to level criticism but to offer assistance for the introduction of judicial reforms. A determined effort had been made since his visit to act upon his recommendations. The Supreme Judicial Council, which had been established in 2016, had been accorded constitutional status. He agreed that its membership should not include members of the executive branch and should be confined to representatives of the judiciary and civil society.

40. Judges' first two terms of office had previously been for a period of five years each. The second term had now been extended to 10 years, and the length of the third term was indefinite. Steps were also being taken to enhance the status of the legal profession and the Bar Chamber. Although there were currently no juvenile court judges, all other components of the juvenile justice system had already been established. Alternative measures to detention and imprisonment were envisaged. A possible bill on free legal assistance for needy persons had been discussed with international partners.

41. **Mr. Ubaydullaev** (Uzbekistan) said that his country guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion and promoted interfaith and inter-ethnic harmony and tolerance. There were currently well over 2,000 religious organizations in Uzbekistan, of which 183 were non-Islamic. They included Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness, Buddhist and other organizations representing 16 different faiths. The Ministry of Justice had registered eight non-Islamic organizations in 2019, including evangelical Christian groups. The composition of the Council on Religious Affairs had been expanded to include representatives of all religions.

42. No property seizures or raids of religious organizations had been conducted during the past six months. The authorities were firmly committed to preventing restrictions on the lawful practice of religion. A key example of the President's humanist approach was his closure of Jasliq Prison in August 2019. Pardons had been granted during the past three years to more than 20,000 inmates who had been convicted on religious grounds.

43. A bill to amend the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations Act was being discussed by a parliamentary committee and working group. It provided for the incorporation of 20 new articles which would, for instance, reduce the number of members required for the registration of a religious organization, reduce the deadline for registration from three to two months and do away with the need to submit a large number of documents and diplomas. A new institute would conduct a judicial investigation into any such organization charged with serious breaches of the law.

44. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations Act currently prohibited proselytism, other missionary activities and activities of unregistered religious organizations because they could disrupt the existing balance among religions and undermine political stability. The Act was being reviewed in cooperation with experts from the United States of America and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of OSCE; the amended Act would reflect the standards enshrined in the Covenant.

45. **Mr. Tashpulatov** (Uzbekistan) said that a bill composed of five chapters on the right to participate in meetings, marches and demonstrations had been drafted. Proposals and comments by the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and by the OHCHR Regional Office for Central Asia had been taken into account, and any possible contradictions with article 33 of the Constitution had been addressed. The bill had been posted on the Government's website. The organization of such events by foreign citizens and stateless persons was prohibited, and a proposal to permit spontaneous assemblies had been rejected on the grounds that the lack of a requirement for prior notification could give rise to widespread disorder.

46. With respect to the questions asked earlier by Ms. Sancin, it should be noted that no sanctions had been imposed on the 30 women who had been arrested following protests in 2018. The two women who had organized a gathering in 2017, Irina Zaidman and Maria Legler, were both citizens of Uzbekistan. On 4 June 2017, they had organized an unsanctioned rally in Duslik Park in Tashkent concerning the Uzbek citizen Zhasurbek Ibragimov. On 15 November 2017, administrative charges had been filed against them under articles 201 and 202 of the Criminal Code, and they had been sentenced to 10 and 15 days, respectively, of administrative detention.

47. **Mr. Ubaydullaev** (Uzbekistan) said that access to all news websites had been restored and that there was no law in effect that provided for blocking access to information platforms. Cabinet Decision No. 707 of 2017 stipulated that access to a website could be restricted by the Information and Mass Communications Agency if it advocated changing the constitutional order by violent means or undermined the country's territorial integrity for purposes of propaganda, terrorism or incitement to religious extremism. Any postings that sought to incite inter-ethnic or interracial hostility could be banned. Uzbekistan opposed some of the working methods of Radio Free Europe because they ran counter to universal ethical norms. The Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications had expressed concern in 2019 about the Uzbekistan service of Radio Free Europe.

48. With regard to the question regarding the criminalization of defamation included in the list of issues (para. 21 (a)), a bill was being drafted pursuant to Presidential Decision No.

4551 of 2019 which provided for the abolition of prison sentences for the offence of defamation or slander.

49. The authorities had restored full access to foreign news outlets and human rights websites. Regular press conferences were held for foreign journalists, who were free to conduct interviews with senior officials.

50. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that a number of accredited ambassadors had criticized some provisions of the draft code on NGOs, which were currently being reviewed in cooperation with civil society organizations with a view to aligning them with international standards. The final version would be submitted for analysis to ODIHR. The bill on meetings, marches and demonstrations would also be in keeping with international standards. There were plans to review the Political Parties Act while bearing in mind, however, that the Constitution prohibited the formation of political parties based on racial, ethnic or religious principles.

51. The ODIHR mission composed of almost 300 observers from 57 OSCE member States that had assessed the 2019 parliamentary elections had accorded Uzbekistan a very high rating. The Electoral Code was in line with article 25 of the Covenant. The ODIHR mission had, however, criticized some provisions of the Code, and those provisions were being scrutinized with a view to the adoption of appropriate amendments. Private funding of individual electoral candidates was prohibited. Funding was provided to the Central Electoral Commission, which then distributed the funds among all candidates.

52. **Ms. Sancin** said that she would welcome additional information concerning non-custodial alternatives to detention for juveniles. She was surprised to hear that the State party had received no applications for asylum, since the Committee had been informed that a number of asylum seekers had encountered difficulties in accessing information concerning the applicable procedures. She would like to know whether steps had been taken to make that information more accessible. It was her understanding that the bill on meetings, marches and demonstrations provided for a system of notification rather than prior authorization; confirmation on that point would be appreciated.

53. **Mr. Bulkan** said that he was aware that a recent ILO report had noted the existence of significant progress in the cotton production sector but, according to that same report, while child labour during the cotton harvest had been eliminated, 6.8 per cent of the workforce in the cotton industry, or about 170,000 persons in 2018 and about 102,000 persons in 2019, were working involuntarily. The report also linked those figures on forced labour to the centrally set quotas. He would therefore welcome information concerning the quota system and working and living conditions in the cotton-picking sector.

54. According to the delegation, there were some 190 shelters in the State party for women victims of domestic violence. The Committee had been informed, however, that there were only 165 shelters, including only 2 in Tashkent. Clarification of the actual number of shelters that were operational would be greatly appreciated. He also understood that the government hotline run by the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan was not functioning as envisaged and that there was no independent hotline for victims of domestic violence. He would be grateful if the delegation could comment on that information.

55. **Ms. Pazartzis** said that she would appreciate information on the comments made by ODIHR concerning decrees relating to information and communications technology.

56. **Mr. Saidov** (Uzbekistan) said that when his country received the Committee's concluding observations, it would develop a road map for their implementation and provide for parliamentary oversight in that connection.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.