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October 21, 2016

The Honorable Thomas A. Shannon, Jr.
Under Secretary for Political Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Ambassador Shannon:

I am writing to urge you to integrate concerns around the human rights of the LGBT community into your discussions with government officials during your upcoming travel to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

For nearly three years, Human Rights First has engaged with LGBT activists in Central Asia as they work to create a safer environment for all citizens regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Throughout the region, members of the LGBT community face institutionalized homophobia and discrimination.

Human Rights First has been particularly engaged in Kyrgyzstan, where a pending propaganda bill threatens the human rights of LGBT people. The bill is directly modeled after Russia's notorious 2013 law, but goes a step further by allowing for prison sentences for violations. You are likely aware that bills such as this one have been introduced throughout the region for the past few years. Given Kyrgyzstan's historic role as one of the more open and democratic countries in the region, we have serious concerns that the passage of this law in Kyrgyzstan will fuel similar efforts in neighboring states.

Last December, a Human Rights First delegation traveled to Kyrgyzstan; we met with U.S. Ambassador Sheila Gwaltney and members of her team as well as several NGOs that focus on LGBT issues. Activists shared heightened concerns about their physical safety; the two major LGBT groups, Labrys and Kyrgyz Indigo, faced direct physical attacks in 2015, including the firebombing of Labrys' office. Transgender individuals continue to face some of the harshest violence and discrimination. There have been several cases of rape of transgender women, with the attacks filmed and the footage distributed online. Police in the southern region have used the propaganda bill to "arrest" members of the LGBT community, who are often treated with violence and forced to pay bribes in exchange for their release.

The Kyrgyz Parliament may soon take up the propaganda bill for its third (and final) reading, and passage is all but assured; legislators approved the bill 90-2 on its second reading. Once the

1/2

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bill passes, President Almazbek Atambayev must decide whether to sign it into law or veto it. Both results are possible and international pressure will play a role in the outcome.

Activists have also informed us of an upcoming constitutional referendum which would redefine marriage to preclude marriage equality for the LGBT community. These activists say the discussions around the referendum and the propaganda law are creating a more difficult climate for members of the LGBT community.

Kazakhstan also recently considered a Russian-style propaganda law. While the legislation was withdrawn, activists there say it may be introduced again in the future. LGBT people face regular violence and discrimination in the country. Police often do not investigate crimes against members of the LGBT community and courts refuse to acknowledge when incidents are motivated by anti-LGBT bias. Trans people are required to undergo sterilization and institutionalization before they can change their gender identity.

In Uzbekistan, homosexuality is illegal and punishable by up to three years in prison. In early 2016, late Uzbek President Islam Karimov described homosexuality as a “vile phenomenon of Western culture.” LGBT people face institutionalized homophobia, abuse by authorities, and rampant discrimination.

We have been pleased to see increased U.S. attention to Central Asia, with Secretary Kerry visiting all five countries last year and meeting with all five foreign ministers at the United Nations. Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons Randy Berry visited Kazakhstan in September and connected with activists from throughout the region.

It is our sincere hope that concerns for the most marginalized populations, including LGBT people, are part of your engagement with leaders in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Please let me know if Human Rights First can be of assistance as you plan your travel and grapple with these pressing human rights concerns.

Sincerely,

Shawn Gaylord
Advocacy Counsel