Allegations of the use of torture in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, in Central Asia, are not new. They hit the UK headlines in October 2004, when the British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, was sacked following outspoken criticism of torture by the Uzbek government, and complaints of Britain’s complicity in sharing evidence obtained through torture.

Such allegations continue: in February 2008 the UN’s Committee Against Torture once again reported numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations of the routine use of torture by Uzbek police and investigators, and failure to investigate complaints.

Against this background, I was invited by the UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in March 2012. I was one of two lecturers leading a two-day training course for Uzbek trial lawyers on the use of international human rights law in preventing torture. More than 30 experienced trial lawyers, women and men, from all the major cities of Uzbekistan took active part in the training. These courageous defence lawyers play an indispensable role in identifying and pursuing the use of torture.

The other lecturer during the course was the Russian advocate Olga Tseitlina from St Petersburg. She works with the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre – a project I founded in 2003. She has successfully represented, at the European Court of Human Rights, refugees from Uzbekistan to Russia, preventing their return to Uzbekistan, where they would face torture.

My latest visit to Uzbekistan was the continuation of quite a few years of experience. I have trained lawyers in the Uzbek cities of Tashkent, Urgench and Ferghana.

One of the participants on the course in March 2012 was well known to me. In 2002 she was a member of a large group of Uzbek lawyers who visited the UK, with the financial assistance of the British Embassy (Craig Murray was still the Ambassador). I lectured to this group during their two-week stay, when they attended lectures on human rights and torture prevention, and visited police stations, courts and prisons in London.

I teach human rights, including the prohibition of torture, at Birkbeck, and since 1992 I have been an active Trustee of the London-based Redress Trust, which works for reparation for torture survivors, and for the elimination of torture worldwide.

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