

WASHINGTON

A Birmingham law firm is representing the imprisoned leader of the Democratic opposition in Uzbekistan, and its lawyers are asking the White House to demand his release.

Sanjar Umarov, chairman of the Sunshine Uzbekistan coalition, was arrested Oct. 22 and accused of financial crimes. An outspoken advocate of political and economic reforms in the former Soviet republic, Umarov is being held in Tashkent, the capital, and his family has said they believe the arrest is political and that he is being mistreated and drugged.

Lawyers with the Birmingham firm of Maynard Cooper and Gale have been in Washington pressing government officials to get involved.

On the congressional side, U.S. Sens. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind., introduced a resolution demanding Umarov be treated humanely. It passed Wednesday night by unanimous consent.

The State Department said it was checking the reports of inhumane treatment. Officials said they could not yet confirm.

"The very fact of these reports is deeply troubling," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Wednesday. "And certainly the fact of other sort of violent, repressive behaviors on the part of the **Uzbek** government in the form of the Andijan incident gives us greater pause when we hear this kind of report, which we do take seriously."

An uprising in Andijan in May was put down by government troops, and many unarmed protesters were killed, although the exact number is disputed. Umarov has been a vocal critic of the crackdown.

Umarov is a physicist and longtime businessman in the southeastern United States and travels frequently between homes in Mississippi, Tennessee and

Uzbekistan. He met with Birmingham lawyers in September because the government of **Uzbek** President Islam A. Karimov had started to harass him, said Jay Mitchell, a Birmingham lawyer.

"If Karimov is going to shut up his critics by throwing them in jail, that's wrong," Mitchell said Wednesday night in Washington.

There is a family connection between Umarov and the Maynard Cooper firm. Umarov is friends with the father of one of the firm's lawyers, and their two sons, Gulam Umarov and Tres Cleveland III, went to college together at Mississippi State University.

"We are very concerned about the health and safety of our father," Gulam Umarov said. "The Karimov government is well known for using physical torture and coercive psychological techniques to harm those who disagree with its rule. It appears that the Karimov government is now engaged in a campaign to destroy our father and all hope of a free Uzbekistan."

Mitchell and Alan Enslin, also of Maynard Cooper, sent a letter to the White House on Wednesday on behalf of Umarov's family.

"(Umarov) feels he is the right man to be at the helm for the political, economic and human rights reforms he wants to see," Enslin said in an interview. "We want to help him achieve that."

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