

**Statement by Senator Sam Brownback, Chairman
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Unrest in Uzbekistan: Crisis and Prospects
May 19, 2005**

This is a very serious time and it is a very serious issue facing Uzbekistan. It is a country that I have dealt with over the years in various capacities from being on the Foreign Relations Committee and now Helsinki Commission chair. It is a country of vital and strategic interest to the United States.

Uzbekistan is a country coming out of the former Soviet Union. Many of us in Congress had great hope that over a period of years, with engagement from the United States, the government would liberalize economically, democratically, and respect human rights. A number of us have pushed that agenda for some period of time.

I've traveled to the country myself. I've met with President Karimov previously and have urged this liberalization.

Since 2001 and the initiation of the war on terrorism, Uzbekistan has been a key ally of the United States. We maintain a military base that has been key for us, particularly in our prosecution of the war in Afghanistan and continued efforts.

But the economic, human rights and democratic liberalization that has been pushed by the West, particularly by the United States, has not been heeded by President Karimov or the Uzbek government. And I think that's why we are where we are today.

If economic liberalization, human rights liberalization, democratic liberalization had been pursued, had there been ways for people to legitimately express their viewpoints, things might have been different. Liberalization has not taken place, so then you have this sort of situation that has happened recently in Uzbekistan.

I do want to note that there are apparently a series of factual questions remaining to be investigated as to what actually took place and how it actually occurred.

Undoubtedly, we do know there were a number of civilians who were killed by officials from the Uzbek government. That did occur. It also appears that there was an armed assault on a government institution taking place by militants within Uzbekistan. That did occur as well.

Whatever specific provocations and the broader sources of frustration, it was not appropriate for there to be a militant armed assault on a government institution and it was not appropriate for the government to respond the way they did.

I am very concerned and worried about how the government responded to this situation, and the attack on unarmed civilians is deeply disturbing. Even if armed groups had previously stormed a jail to release prisoners, possibly even including terrorists and even if the number of

killed and wounded is far smaller than what had been reported by the media, it is a flagrant application of lethal force by the Uzbek government. That's inappropriate, and it is wrong.

Along with the State Department I condemn the indiscriminate use of force against civilian populations in Uzbekistan.

But I think we come now to a moment of serious thought and reflection and opportunity. We got here because Uzbekistan has had too little democratic and economic opportunity and human rights. It is my opinion, as well as a number of people in the legislative and executive branch believes liberalization to must occur, for human rights, for democracy, and for economic opportunity.

Instead, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, President Karimov has insisted on maintaining the tightest controls. The most basic freedoms are flouted. In Uzbekistan, no opposition parties have been registered since the early 1990s, a Soviet-era type of citizenship of the media remains in place.

President Karimov has justified his policies by the need to crack down on Islamic radicals who want to topple his secular regime. It's true, of course, that Uzbekistan has faced and continues to face a genuine, albeit reduced threat from militant radicals. But I fear President Karimov's approach has produced the very outcome he wants to prevent.

We have many shared interests with Uzbekistan, especially cooperating against international terrorism. I have long counseled moderation in U.S. policy and called for realistic expectations, hoping for slow and steady progress. But we have not seen that take place.

If there's any hope to be found in what has recently happened, I believe that President Karimov and the Government of Uzbekistan has a major opportunity here. I urge them to launch serious reforms to democratize the political system and liberalize the economy and provide for human rights for the people of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan stands at a crossroads, and time is of the essence. I believe it is not too late to take this opportunity and try to salvage the situation of liberalization for human rights, democracy and the economy. I sincerely hope the Uzbek government and President Karimov understands the stakes that are involved for his nation.

This briefing is intended to offer concrete suggestions on how to proceed. I am appreciative of the witnesses putting forth their testimony. We cannot continue to see civilians shot and killed by the government in Uzbekistan. That is wrong.

But I think the way forward is the liberalization that many have pushed for, and that's something that we need to see take place.

I'd also call for an international investigation into the instances that have taken place in Uzbekistan over the past several weeks. This needs to be investigated by outside bodies to

understand the factual situation and to make a report not only to the Uzbek government, but to the world community, of what's taken place.

It's my hope that this briefing will help move that process forward of the investigation and also reforms within Uzbekistan.