



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing. The issues raised by the crisis in Uzbekistan go to the very heart of the Helsinki process and some of the toughest problems U.S. policymakers have to address.

Having closely followed events in Uzbekistan for years, I think the most populous country in Central Asia may be at a tipping point. It is my impression that U.S. policy toward that country has reached a similar stage.

The political order that emerged in the former Soviet Union after its collapse is itself unraveling. As Georgian President Saakashvili and Ukrainian President Yushchenko have written, a third wave of liberty has begun in Europe. Central Asian leaders, especially Kyrgyz President Akaev, reacted to the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine by claiming "it can't happen here." President Karimov took the same position. But when neighboring Kyrgyzstan experienced its own revolution in March, he must have felt a cold wind blowing. President Karimov made clear his determination that no such events would take place on his watch, in his country. So, when protesters began gathering in Andijon in mid-May, I think Karimov decided to send them a message: "If you think this is Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan, I'll show you different."

And he did. Though the Uzbek Government continues to insist that "only" 173 people died, the U.S. Government and most authoritative human rights NGOs believe many hundreds died. I welcome the report prepared by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights which helps shed some light on the events in Andijon. By its own admission, that report is not a comprehensive, independent investigation that many of us have sought. I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses, including those who were in the crowd in Andijon and, by a miracle, survived to tell what went on that bloody day.

What should we conclude from the Andijon tragedy? What happened in that city demonstrates the interlinked consequences of Uzbekistan's lack of political and economic

reform. The bloody confrontation had its origins in a trial of 23 devout businessmen whose enterprises employed thousands. Their economic success drew the attention of officials, who, failing to control the businesses, arrested their owners and charged them with Islamic radicalism. The rest, as they say, is history. In other words, if Islam Karimov allowed people to make a living in Uzbekistan, instead of maintaining Soviet-style economic practices and a bloated bureaucracy, many more people might be alive today in Andijon.

Similarly, the country's unreformed judicial system, which remains fully controlled by the executive branch, leaves people unable to defend their rights and imprisons individuals by the thousands. They cannot rely on an objective examination of evidence or hope for an impartial verdict. The supporters of the 23 Andijon businessmen – including those who freed the jailed, attacked a military barracks and occupied government buildings – took to the streets after the trial of the businessmen neared an end, in proceedings many in the local population deemed unfair and unjust.

There is no excuse for the armed attack on a military barracks, the taking of hostages, or the occupation of the local government administration buildings. But we cannot close our eyes to the growing frustration of Uzbekistan's longsuffering people either.

Considering the lack of progress on core human dimension issues in Uzbekistan and elsewhere throughout the region, the United States must use every means at its disposal to move the countries of Central Asia to greater respect for these fundamental rights. Therefore, I am introducing this week the Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Act, which will condition all non-humanitarian U.S. assistance to the individual governments of Central Asia, both economic and military, on whether each is making "substantial, sustained and demonstrable progress" towards democratization and full respect of human rights. The Act will ensure U.S. engagement supports American values, promotes long-term stability and security in the region, and ensures that all assistance programs support and reinforce these goals.

What conclusions can we draw from Islam Karimov's response to Andijon? President Karimov has shown that he will not permit a peaceful revolution or even any change in Uzbekistan. He is prepared to use lethal force to disperse protesters and retain power. If more disturbances take place, he will likely do the same. How long Uzbek security forces carry out his orders to fire, however, remains an open question.

At home, Karimov has hunkered down, arresting opposition activists, independent journalists and intimidating witnesses to the Andijon events. When a delegation of U.S. Senators traveled to Uzbekistan to make inquiries, neither Karimov nor any Uzbek officials met with them. At the same time, he is lashing out at his accusers. Karimov has accused "foreign powers" of trying to control Uzbekistan. Uzbek media broadcasts barely concealed their attacks on the

U.S. for allegedly seeking to undermine Uzbek independence. Karimov has turned to China and Russia, which have praised his handling of the Andijon crisis. Worsening U.S.-Uzbekistan relations have left the future of our base at K-2 uncertain. Tashkent has imposed new restrictions on U.S. military flights, including cargo flights, limiting them to daytime missions.

Perhaps the U.S. has already broken with Islam Karimov, and we just don't know it yet. In any case, it is hard to see where we go from here. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses as the United States, the OSCE, and the international community attempt to come to terms with the carnage at Andijon, fleeing refugees, and overall policy toward the Karimov regime.