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Uzbekistan: Two Years after Andijon May 18, 2007

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I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before this Commission. I have been a regional analyst at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) focusing on Central Asia since December 2003. Today, almost two years to the day after I addressed this Commission in the immediate aftermath of the violence in Andijon, I will discuss the deadlock of Uzbekistan's relations with the West and try to determine whether there is any way out of the impasse. The views I express here are my own and do not reflect any official position of my employer, RFE/RL.

Uzbekistan Two Years after Andijon

It is dishearteningly simple to summarize the domestic situation in Uzbekistan two years after the authorities crushed unrest in Andijon. After that event, the European Union and United States, responding to credible allegations that the government of President Islam Karimov employed grossly disproportionate force against a mixed crowd of gunmen and peaceful protesters in Andijon, asked the Uzbek government to allow an independent, international investigation. The Uzbek government has been steadfast in its refusal, and the international community still has no answers to its many questions about what really took place in Andijon on May 12-13, 2005.

The Uzbek government's stubborn refusal to allow any meaningful independent inquiry into the tragic bloodshed in Andijon is broadly symbolic of its policies in other areas, which remain in equal measure inflexible and impervious to internal and external criticism. The economy is no more open or equitable today than it was two years ago, the political system no more democratic, the media no freer to play a positive role in

society, and the rights of citizens no safer from the arbitrary deprivations of unaccountable officials.

I stress that there has been no meaningful progress on any of the issues on which Western governments have repeatedly expressed concern -- political and economic reform, human rights, and an independent investigation of the Andijon tragedy. Meanwhile, the Uzbek government has continued to close off the country from independent sources of information, hampered the ability of Western correspondents and news agencies to cover events in Uzbekistan, and applied heavy pressure to domestic rights activists. Despite these obstacles, international organizations and media, including RFE/RL, have amply documented the lamentable state of affairs within Uzbekistan. In sum, on this front, the dominant element has been stasis.

Only one element roils the strictly enforced tranquility of Uzbek domestic politics. President Islam Karimov's term ends this year, and he is constitutionally barred from running for reelection in the presidential election slated to take place in December 2007. The post-Soviet history of Central Asia offers numerous examples of dubious referenda and constitutional casuistry allowing presidents to serve indefinitely; such a solution to the legal problem may be in the offing in Uzbekistan. For now, official Tashkent is silent, and no moves to anoint a successor are evident.

The problem will, however, require a formal solution by the end of this year, with a constitutionally jerry-rigged continuation of the status quo or a stage-managed transfer of power to a hastily anointed successor the two most likely outcomes. Unfortunately, we lack sufficient information about the true state of affairs within the Uzbek ruling elite to make even a preliminary guess about a potential successor. What is important to stress is that there is absolutely no evidence that positive change is possible under Karimov, and no evidence that any preparations are underway for a succession that would open the door to the possibility of positive change.

What Can We Do?

Before moving to the question of what US and European policymakers can do to chart a new course for relations with Uzbekistan, we must acknowledge a number of harsh truths:

- The West has little leverage over Uzbekistan;

- The government of Islam Karimov will never agree to an independent, international investigation of unrest in Andijon;
- European sanctions against Uzbekistan have been ineffective;
- Prospects for positive change within Uzbekistan and improved relations with the West are slim as long as Karimov remains in power.

The limits of Western leverage in relations with Uzbekistan are by now painfully obvious. President Islam Karimov relished the prestige he gained from closer ties with the West amid heightened security cooperation after September 11, 2001, but this proved insufficient inducement to usher in any substantive changes to domestic policy. In the absence of economic ties to match Uzbekistan's links to countries like Russia and China, which are entirely satisfied with the current state of affairs within Uzbekistan, the West must acknowledge that its leverage in Uzbekistan is extremely limited.

President Islam Karimov has staked a domestic and international claim to a version of events in Andijon that he cannot and will not forsake. The official Uzbek story is that Andijon represented a "carefully planned act of terror" by religious extremists with international ties and that Uzbekistan's security services used necessary force in response. What's more, Uzbekistan's refusal to submit to an outside inquiry has been enshrined as the cornerstone of official policy in the form of a book by the president entitled *The Uzbek People Will Never Be Dependent on Anyone*. In sum, the demand for an international investigation of the Andijon events, however justified morally, will never be satisfied as long as Karimov remains in power.

European sanctions against Uzbekistan, which have been in place since 2005 in the form of a travel ban against 12 high-ranking officials and a prohibition on arms sales, have not brought about any change in Uzbekistan's domestic or foreign policy. The sanctions were largely symbolic, as Uzbekistan imports weapons from elsewhere, most of the 12 officials on the original list are no longer serving, and ailing then Interior Minister Zokir Almatov was able to travel to Germany despite the visa ban. The EU's recent decision to strike four officials from the travel-ban list only underscores the symbolic nature of the endeavor. The past two years of Uzbek policy confirm its ineffectiveness.

The Uzbek regime under Karimov is an undemocratic, serial violator of human rights beholden to the interests of an economically predatory elite.

We should not expect this to change in the near future, nor should we expect that the actions of Western policymakers can bring about such change.

Western policy toward Uzbekistan proceeds from a core belief that democracy, the rule of law, and a free-market economy provide the best guarantees of stability and prosperity. Clearly, then, relations with Uzbekistan pose an enormous challenge. To make matters worse, Western policy is premised on the demand for an investigation that Uzbekistan will not accept and on sanctions that have not proved effective. Is there a way out?

There are two possible approaches to this dilemma, both of which might offer a way out of the impasse. Neither, however, is likely to solve the majority of the problems that bedevil the West's relations with Uzbekistan. Bearing in mind this crucial caveat, I would like to put two solutions on the table.

The first approach is to pursue more active engagement with the Karimov government. The second is to pursue a more consistently tough and principled policy with an eye to a post-Karimov Uzbekistan.

More active engagement with the Karimov government would involve some or all of the following steps:

- Deemphasize, but do not entirely drop, the demand for an independent investigation of the Andijon events;
- Allow EU sanctions to expire;
- Moderate official statements on Uzbekistan;
- Actively pursue ties in areas that the Uzbek government views as relatively apolitical, such as cultural and educational exchanges;
- Maintain, and perhaps even expand, cooperation on counterterrorism and counternarcotics issues, but with oversight to ensure that programs do not add to the capacity of Uzbekistan's security services to suppress internal dissent;
- Seek to encourage incremental changes in areas where the Uzbek government has signaled a willingness to make changes, such as broadening the role of political parties.

A tougher, more principled policy, based on existing approaches toward such recalcitrant regimes as Belarus, Burma, Zimbabwe, and North Korea, would involve some or all of the following steps:

- Retain the demand for an independent investigation of the Andijon events;
- Toughen EU sanctions to cover current leading figures in the Karimov regime, including the president and members of his family;
- Actively investigate the criminal ties and related financial interests of leading regime figures through such avenues as the US Treasury Department and legislation modeled on current approaches to Iran and Syria designed to put financial pressure on the regime without harming the population;
- Bar all regime figures determined to be complicit in illegal financial activities and/or human rights violations in Uzbekistan from entry to the EU and United States;
- End all EU and US financial assistance to the Uzbek government;
- Clearly and publicly link all punitive measures to specific rights violations by the Uzbek regime and specify the concrete steps needed to remove these measures, such as an independent investigation of the Andijon events;
- Incentivize movement toward genuine reform by linking it to a renewal of assistance programs and reintegration into the international community;
- Establish a Future of Uzbekistan program to make use of the knowledge and abilities of the many Uzbek journalists and scholars whom the regime has forced abroad. Working in coordination with such organizations as the Open Society Institute and National Endowment for Democracy, this program would support exiled Uzbeks in an effort to understand better the processes taking place within Uzbekistan and ways to remedy the disastrous state of affairs there as soon as real opportunities for positive change arise. The program would also involve the creation of a web portal with materials in Uzbek and other languages to provide information and alternative perspectives, as well as a forum for Uzbeks abroad to exchange views and maintain a sense of community.

Based on the experience of past years, we can formulate general expectations of the outcomes if current policy is maintained or either of

these new policies is adopted. If current policy is maintained, we can expect little or no change in Uzbekistan. If a policy of active engagement is adopted, we can expect:

- Little or no change in Uzbekistan;
- A significant loss of Western credibility among ordinary Uzbeks;
- A significant loss of Western credibility among observers who might compare Western policy toward Uzbekistan with policy toward such nations as Belarus, Burma, and Zimbabwe;
- Greater consolidation within the Uzbek elite around the policies of the current regime.

If a more consistently tough and principled policy is adopted, we can expect:

- A short-term deterioration of relations with Uzbekistan, which, given the current state of relations, will have a negligible effect on overall relations;
- The loss of Germany's military facility in Termez;
- Increasing ferment within the Uzbek elite, as those segments opposed to current policies begin to chafe at the costs to their personal interests abroad, and press for a different approach to domestic policy and relations with the international community;
- Greater credibility with the Uzbek people, the vast majority of whom have no opportunity for economic or personal advancement under the current regime.

In light of the preceding, it is my recommendation that the United States and European Union take a tougher, more principled stance on Uzbekistan in line with existing policies toward such regimes as Belarus, Burma, and Zimbabwe. Thank you for your time.