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**Unrest in Uzbekistan: Crisis and Consequences
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I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before this Committee. My academic background is primarily in history, but for the past several years I have focused on economic, political, and social developments in Russia and Central Asia. I began to write about Russian affairs for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in 2002. Since December 2003, I have been RFE/RL's Central Asia analyst. Today, I will address recent unrest in Uzbekistan, focusing in particular on the specific events of 12-13 May in the city of Andijon and actions the international community can take in cooperation with the Uzbek government to investigate this tragedy. The following written statement is based in part on an article that appeared on RFE/RL on 17 May 2005 ("Uzbekistan: What Really Happened on Bloody Friday?"). The views I express here are my own.

WHAT HAPPENED IN ANDIJON ON 13 MAY 2005?

The events that took place on and after 13 May 2005 in Andijon, Uzbekistan have drawn the attention of the entire world. On 18 May, the U.S. State Department said, "It's becoming apparent that very large numbers of civilians were killed by the indiscriminate use of force by Uzbek forces." In this light, the State Department stressed, "There needs to be an open and credible transparent inquiry into this and the international community would stand ready to assist in that." In the hope that such an investigation will take place, I would like here to summarize some of what we know about events in Andijon and put forward a number of concrete recommendations for lines of inquiry.

The horrific bloodshed that occurred in Uzbekistan breaks down, on closer examination, into two interconnected events that raise two separate groups of issues. The first issue is an attack on the night of 12 May by armed men on a military garrison and prison, with the subsequent freeing of prisoners and seizure of the regional-administrative building in Andijon. The second issue is the use of deadly force against demonstrators who gathered on 13 May on the city's central square near the occupied regional-administration building. Uzbek President Islam Karimov and his government have presented official explanations for both events. But independent reports cast the first event in a different light, and paint a radically different picture of the second. The "credible and transparent accounting" urged by the U.S. State Department and other members of the international community should investigate these two issues separately in order to ensure findings that resolve the disputes surrounding these events and to assign responsibility where responsibility is due.

1. The Assault

At a news conference in Tashkent on 14 May, President Karimov provided a detailed account of the assault by armed men on the night of 12 May and morning of 13 May first on a police unit, then on a military garrison, and finally on a prison. After this, they seized the regional administration building and made unsuccessful attempts to storm the regional offices of the National Security Service and Interior Ministry. Karimov focused on losses among security personnel and stressed that the attackers were Islamic extremists from an offshoot of the banned extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. He also stated that phone intercepts showed that the militants consulted with "masters" in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Independent accounts of this first event differed from the version presented by Karimov less in the factual details of the nighttime assaults than in the motivation imputed to the armed attackers. In a clear reference to Hizb ut-Tahrir, Karimov described the attackers' goal as "setting up a caliphate in Uzbekistan...which will allegedly include Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and all other countries," Uzbek Television reported. While independent reports did not dispute the attackers' decision to resort to violence, they did not uncover any specific statements indicating sympathy with Hizb ut-Tahrir's aim of establishing a caliphate ruled by Islamic law, nor did they suggest a more general Islamist context for the violent action.

Sharipjon Shakirov, who had served a four-year prison term for involvement in what the government describes as the Akramiya¹ Islamist group (see below), was one of the men who occupied the regional-administrative building in Andijon. In telephone communications from the building, he told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service on 13 May that "repression and slander" drove him and others to violent action. He added, "We do not have any connection with those groups [banned Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir]." He continued: "We have only one demand. [The authorities] should release those people who were imprisoned based on slander, including Akram Yuldoshev." On his own time in prison, Shakirov commented: "We want all those imprisoned on false charges to be released because there are many political prisoners in Uzbekistan. I know this because I served a prison term myself." RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported that Shakirov was among those killed later on 13 May.

Akram Yuldoshev, whose name serves to denote the "Akramiya" group, is currently serving a 17-year prison sentence on terrorism charges. In February, 23 businessmen from Andijon went on trial on charges of involvement in Akramiya. The armed men who began the violence in Andijon on the night of 12 May were apparently their supporters. At issue in the cases of Yuldoshev, the above-mentioned Shakirov, the 23 businessmen, and their supporters is the credibility of the Uzbek government's claims, as represented in criminal convictions and charges, that they were religious extremists with links to the banned extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, which espouses the creation of a caliphate throughout Central Asia and the implementation of Islamic law, although it eschews violence (and has specifically denied any involvement in the events in Andijon). For if

¹ Various spelled "Akramiya," "Akramia," "Akramiyya," "Akromiya," and "Akromia."

these official claims are to be believed, the role of religious extremists in starting the violence would seem indisputable.

The problem is that the Uzbek government's record on this score is anything but encouraging. The U.S. State Department's 2004 report on human rights in Uzbekistan, presented on 28 February 2005, details numerous instances of rights violations, many of them involving individuals accused of Hizb ut-Tahrir involvement. The report states that "authorities treated individuals suspected of extreme Islamist sympathies, particularly alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, more harshly than ordinary criminals, and there were credible reports that investigators subjected persons suspected of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir to particularly severe interrogation in pretrial detention, in many cases resorting to torture."

The report also notes, "Local human rights activists reported that police and security-service officers, acting under pressure to break up Hizb ut-Tahrir cells, frequently detained family members and close associates of suspected members, even if there was no direct evidence of their involvement. Authorities made little distinction between actual members and those with marginal affiliation with the group, often persons who had attended Koranic study sessions with the group." Addressing the issue of fair trials, the report states: "Defendants often claimed that the confessions on which the prosecution based its cases were extracted by torture. In many cases, particularly involving suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the prosecution failed to produce confessions and relied solely on witness testimony, which was reportedly often coerced. Typical sentences for male members of Hizb ut-Tahrir ranged from seven to 12 years' imprisonment."

Against this backdrop, Shakirov's statement about "those imprisoned on false charges" gains weight, as does the bitter complaint voiced by Yuldoshev's wife and quoted by Forum 18, a Norway-based group that deals with issues of religious freedom: "They're not content that my innocent husband is locked up in prison, but are trying to make out of him some kind of bin Laden." The same holds for Forum 18's report that "local people Forum 18 has spoken to reject Uzbek government and foreign press allegations that Akramiya was set up by former Hizb ut-Tahrir members, dissatisfied by the organization's professed rejection of violence, as a means to achieve the aim of an Islamic caliphate."

A forthcoming report by International Crisis Group (ICG) entitled "Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising" also examines conflicting claims about the Akramiya movement. The preliminary text of the report notes that a 1999 article by a "noted Uzbek scholar" explains that "[Akram] Yuldoshev's teachings formed the core of an organized religious reform movement in Andijon, dubbed the 'Akromiya' movement, some of whose methods and doctrines were informed by its founder's years in Hizb ut-Tahrir." Meanwhile, ICG writes, "human rights defenders...claim that the entire movement is nothing more than a fabrication of the Uzbek security forces." ICG concludes, "On the whole, it seems that the reality lies somewhere in the middle; far from being an organized extremist movement seeking to overthrow the Uzbek government, the 'Akromiya' movement appears to have been a loose, informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young

entrepreneurs, who were inspired by Yuldoshev's teachings to pool their resources for the benefit of their communities."

None of the preceding constitutes sufficient evidence to conclude that the participants in the initial violence -- the attack on the military garrison and prison; the seizure of the regional-administration building -- were or were not extremists. Rather, it shows that there are ample grounds to doubt Uzbek official claims of extremist involvement in the absence of additional evidence to back up those claims. Thus far, none of the independent reports of events in Andijon on 12-13 May indicates that the armed men on the antigovernment side employed extremist rhetoric or symbolism. An individual identified as a Western journalist who was in Andijon on 13 May told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR): "This rebellion has nothing to do with religion. I did not hear cries of Allahu Akbar, and none of the rebels inside the regional-administration building mentioned anything about an Islamic state."

Contrasting evidence may come to light, but for now, the most that can be said is that the armed men committed violent acts. Independent reports, such as the BBC's account of the initial violence, support that much of the official version; they do not, however, provide corroborating evidence for the official claim that the attackers were religious extremists.

2. The Massacre

The second issue is -- an important point -- not directly related to the first: it involves the use of deadly force against unarmed civilians. On this point, the official version put forward by President Karimov directly contradicts the reports of independent journalists on the scene as well as virtually all recorded eyewitness accounts.

In his news conference on 14 May, Karimov stressed that after talks with the rebels broke down, "they broke into three groups, left the [regional-administration] building and began running away in three directions. A chase began." On the death toll, he said: "A total of more than 10 people, including the military, police, and innocent people, were killed. There are far more killed on their side" -- the rebel side, presumably -- "than the other." Karimov denied that he or anyone else had given an order to shoot. He told journalists, "I know that you want to know who gave the order to shoot," Reuters reported. "No one gave such an order." The implication is that rebels shot first and were responsible for civilian deaths.

Uzbek Prosecutor-General Rashid Kadyrov presented updated casualty figures at a news conference in Tashkent on 17 May, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported. According to Kadyrov, 169 people were killed in the unrest in Andijon on 13 May. He said the dead include 32 members of government forces, three women, and two children. Kadyrov's remarks implied that the remainder of the dead were either armed rebels or hostages the rebels shot as they escaped in three groups from the occupied regional-administration building in Andijon on 13 May, fergana.ru reported. Kadyrov insisted that government forces did not fire on civilians in the city.

Independent accounts paint an entirely different picture, not only of the incident itself, but also of its consequences. After the rebels seized the regional-administration building, a large demonstration ensued in the central square of Andijon. (A photograph of the crowd, showing many women and children, can be found here:

<http://www.newsteam.ru/reports/index.html?1,562,8.>) Correspondents for Reuters and IWPR were on the scene. Reuters reported, "Troops then opened fire on a square in [Andijon] where protesters had massed and stormed the [occupied regional-administration] building." IWPR reported: "The eight-wheeled armored personnel carriers, APCs, appeared out of nowhere, moving through the streets at speed, past the people on the outer fringes of the rally. The first column of vehicles thundered past without taking any aggressive action. But a second column arriving five minutes later suddenly opened up on the crowds, firing off round after round without even slowing down to take aim."

Eyewitness accounts recorded by IWPR, Reuters, AFP, RFE/RL, "Kommersant-Daily," fergana.ru, "Washington Post," "Christian Science Monitor," "The New York Times," and other news organizations also indicated that troops fired indiscriminately at unarmed demonstrators. Moreover, some accounts indicated that when troops directed their fire, they targeted the wounded. A woman identified as Muqaddas told IWPR: "[Military servicemen] got drunk, and in this condition they shot and killed the wounded. In my presence, they shot down a woman with two small children." A man identified as a 31-year-old cobbler told Reuters, "I saw soldiers killing several wounded with single shots to the head after asking 'are there any wounded around?'" Another Andijon resident told Reuters, "Those wounded who tried to get away were finished off with single shots from a Kalashnikov rifle. ... Three or four soldiers were assigned to killing the wounded."

The death toll from the events of 13 May remains unclear. Several eyewitness accounts stated that 500 were killed in Andijon (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 16 May 2005). The unregistered Uzbek opposition party Ozod Dehqonlar (Free Farmers) has sent representatives door-to-door to collect the names of the dead in Andijon and Pakhtaobod, a nearby town where unconfirmed reports speak of a brutally suppressed uprising after the violence in Andijon, "Izvestiya" reported on 17 May. As of 16 May, the list contained 745 names, 542 from Andijon and 203 from Pakhtaobod. Nigora Hidoyatova, the head of Ozod Dehqonlar, said that the party will continue its efforts to compile a full list of the dead.

3. Recommendations

As the preceding suggests, an inquiry into the bloodshed in Uzbekistan should treat two distinct issues. Broadly speaking, these are 1) the actions of armed rebels and 2) the reports that government forces fired on civilians. An investigation may uncover significant overlap between these two issues. But in focusing on them separately, the investigation will be better able to organize its work along the lines of specific questions. Some, but not all, of those questions are:

On the actions of armed rebels:

- Who were the armed men who attacked a military garrison and prison on the night of 12 May?
- Did they have any ties supported by hard evidence to an extremist organization or organizations?
- What were their ultimate aims?
- How many inmates did they release from the prison on 12 May, and are there reasonable grounds for believing that any of those inmates were members of extremist and/or terrorist organizations?
- What are the current whereabouts of the inmates who were released?
- Did negotiations take place between the government and rebels
- If so, what was their substance and outcome?

On the reports that government forces fired on civilians:

- Who started the violence in the center of Andijon on the evening of 13 May?
- Did Uzbek troops fire on unarmed civilians?
- If so, were they acting under orders?
- If so, who gave those orders?
- How many people were killed, and under what circumstances?

The precise format of a future investigation can only emerge through cooperation between the Uzbek government and the international community. One possible vehicle for such cooperation, as well as a subsequent investigation, is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Uzbekistan is a member-state of the OSCE, which possesses both the regional experience and resources to offer valuable assistance. A desirable outcome would be the creation of an investigative commission under OSCE auspices and with the involvement of both Uzbek government representatives and representatives of the international community to examine the violence in Andijon on and following 13 May with the aim of determining the exact number and nature of casualties and assigning responsibility for the bloodshed. Given that President Karimov and other Uzbek officials have expressly denied that any orders were given to fire on civilians, it should be stressed that it is manifestly in their interest to see a credible investigation confirm those statements.

An additional issue of relevance both to an investigation of events in Andijon and to the international community as a whole is the plight of over 500 Uzbek refugees currently in Kyrgyzstan. As a 19 May article in "The New York Times" detailed, the refugees fled the bloodshed in Andijon and may be able to provide invaluable insight into what transpired there. Yet their status remains precarious. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) noted in a 17 May press release that the "new arrivals have been registered as asylum seekers by the Kyrgyz Department of Migration Service and issued temporary cards valid for 10 days by the Kyrgyz authorities."

President Karimov stated in a 17 May press conference that he does not consider these individuals refugees because Kyrgyz border guards allegedly confiscated 73 automatic

weapons from them. But Gulmira Borubaeva, a spokesperson for Kyrgyzstan's Border Service, has specifically denied this, saying, "They did not have weapons," fergana.ru reported on 19 May. Nevertheless, a number of Kyrgyz officials have said that the refugees cannot remain in Kyrgyzstan indefinitely (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 16 and 18 May 2005) and may be returned to Uzbekistan. More than 100 human-rights NGOs in Kyrgyzstan appealed to the Kyrgyz government on 17 May not to allow the refugees' return to Uzbekistan, arguing that they are likely to face torture, and even extrajudicial execution, in the event of their return. For its part, the UNHCR has stated that it "welcomes the Kyrgyz government's assurances that people will not be forcibly returned to Uzbekistan and its moves to register the newcomers as asylum seekers."

Kyrgyzstan only recently experienced significant political upheaval, and its new government is attempting to establish itself even as the country prepares for presidential elections on 10 July. It could thus be especially vulnerable to pressure from its larger, more powerful neighbor to return the refugees to Uzbekistan. In order to forestall potential pressure on the Kyrgyz government and safeguard the wellbeing of the refugees, the operation and management of the camp where they are housed should be transferred, with the consent of the Kyrgyz government, to the UN or Red Cross. International organizations should also take responsibility for the admission of new refugees from Uzbekistan.

4. Conclusion

The tragic events in Andijon have left many questions unanswered. But the information available is sufficient to justify a concerted search for answers. What I hope to have done here is to underscore the pressing need for the "credible and transparent accounting" that the U.S. State Department has urged, as well as to suggest some of the lines along which it might be conducted.