



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Robert Templer

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I would like to thank Senator Brownback, the chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the other distinguished members of the commission for giving me this opportunity today to testify on behalf of the International Crisis Group.

Crisis Group has been working in Uzbekistan since 2000 and we have produced more than a dozen reports on the country. Our staff in Central Asia have interviewed hundreds of people in the country and carried out extensive research on key issues in the region.

Most recently Crisis Group published a report setting out some of the background to the Andijon massacre and examining the social, economic and religious issues involved. Our colleagues at Human Rights Watch have also produced a detailed report on the events of May 13 and 14 that is also based on extensive interviews with witnesses. IWPR has also provided excellent reporting from Andijon. There has not been a full investigation by any intergovernmental organization into the events. Based on our research and that of other organisations, we have concluded:

- The response by the Uzbek security forces was wholly disproportionate to any crimes that had been committed and excessive force was used against people who were not involved in criminal activity
- Among the victims of the action of the security forces were townspeople, including women and children, who were bystanders; We don't know how many died – it could be as many as 750 people, according to some reports. We think it is at least 300-500.
- The 23 men on trial for being members of the so-called Akromiya group were not religious extremists and had no record of violence.
- Economic grievances and political repression motivated many of those who demonstrated in Andijon rather than any Islamist agenda.

· No credible evidence has been produced to show any involvement of people from outside Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek government has responded to international concern about the massacre with what can only be characterised as contempt:

- President Islam Karimov has rejected calls for an international investigation.
- Diplomats were only allowed to visit Andijon on a closely supervised tour that many of them described as unsatisfactory.
- President Islam Karimov and other Uzbek officials refused to meet with Senators John McCain, Lindsay Graham and John Sununu.
- The Uzbek government has restricted substantially U.S. access to Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, limiting flights by particular planes, limiting hours when flights can arrive and making it more difficult for the U.S. to use the facilities.
- The Uzbek government has applied intense pressure on the Kyrgyz government to return refugees. The repatriation of these people under the current circumstances would be a violation of international law concerning refugees and torture.
- Uzbek authorities have threatened witnesses and created a climate of intense fear in Andijon. This has included the intimidation and harassment of the family members of refugees.

- The government has withdrawn the already meagre cooperation with outside aid groups and governments, for example withdrawing visas for Peace Corps volunteers.
- The events in Andijon have been followed by a country-wide campaign of intimidation, harassment, and in some cases detention of local human rights activists and independent journalists.
- Foreign journalists have likewise been prevented from reporting on the events and their aftermath. For example, BBC Central Asia correspondent Monica Whitlock has been expelled from the country for "biased reporting" and "aiding terrorists."

These are just the latest steps by an uncooperative government that rejects the values of democracy, human rights and economic freedom. For nearly 15 years U.S. and European governments have been trying to encourage reforms and greater openness in Uzbekistan. Since 2001, the United States stepped up those efforts, offering considerable assistance and signing an agreement under which Uzbekistan agreed to press ahead with reforms. The bilateral agreement involved clear commitments for steady progress toward both economic and political reforms on the one hand and military cooperation in facilitating U.S. military supply lines to Afghanistan as part of the war against terrorism on the other.

The U.S. also argued that the reform part of that agreement also advanced the war against terrorism by enabling the Uzbekistan government to demonstrate to its own citizens a better future, the best argument against radical recruitment. The United States extended a generous hand to support those reforms in Uzbekistan. However Islam Karimov has chosen to rebuff that friendship and become more repressive and more resistant to any outside engagement.

Moreover, the Karimov regime has consistently drawn the wrong conclusions from the popular revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, brought about by the population's frustration with corrupt, often repressive regimes dominated by representatives of the Soviet-era nomenklatura. The Karimov regime has interpreted the fall of its counterparts elsewhere in the former Soviet Union as a sign of "weakness" on their part, and has only increased his oppression of his own people, a policy that will probably only hasten his own regime's demise.

There is now a widespread recognition that Karimov has set Uzbekistan on a dangerous path of self-destruction and will not be persuaded by any government that his policies are a disaster. Uzbekistan is now a member of that group of countries -- Zimbabwe, Burma, North Korea, Belarus and others -- who are ruled by men who don't just show a lack of concern for their people but are willing to inflict any level of suffering and hardship on them as long as they remain in power. The United States has taken strong stands against the leaders of those other countries. It is time to take the same stand against Karimov.

Karimov's past behaviour provides us with no hope that he will change his policies. His background is as a Soviet state planner and he still views the world through the lens of a Brezhnev-era apparatchik. He wants to see what he calls "civilised trade" by which he means all businesses are controlled by his officials. His edicts have crushed all economic opportunity, leaving people despairing and unable to earn the sparsest of incomes. He is contemptuous of the ideas of parliamentary democracy, religious freedom, press freedom or economic freedom. He runs one of the most repressive police states in the world. He targets people of faith and employs his feared secret services to torture and abuse them. He has banned Moslem and Christian groups and sent thousands to some of the most terrible prison camps on earth purely for their religious beliefs. As a result of these policies, he rules a country in which people are nostalgic for the Soviet Union.

There is a growing expectation that the end of Karimov's rule will be violent. A civil conflict in Uzbekistan could be a disaster for Central Asia, sending refugees into neighbouring countries that are ill-equipped to cope, undermining fragile states in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, reversing economic gains in Kazakhstan and potentially providing an area of unrest in which Islamic extremists and criminals would only prosper. U.S. policymakers should still aim to get Karimov onto the right path but they should recognise the fact that this is unlikely to happen and start planning to minimise the dangers he presents to the security of Central Asia.

There are very few good options for the short term in Uzbekistan. There is no set of policies that can make Karimov immediately open up his country and deal with the real grievances of his people. There are some steps that are important to take because they would at least signal to the Uzbek people that America is on their side, not the side of their despot.

Among the steps we would like to see:

- A consistent demand from all parts of the U.S. government calling for an independent

international investigation into events in Andijon. This demand should be made in all fora -- the UN, the OSCE and through NATO -- as well as in all bilateral contacts, including those from the military and Department of Defense.

- Suspension of negotiations on the lease of Karshi-Khanabad base until Uzbekistan agrees to an independent investigation. Given the lack of cooperation in recent months over the base, defence planners should give careful consideration to the usefulness of having such a grudging ally in the region when other countries might be more cooperative.
- The use of the "Moscow Mechanism" of the OSCE that would allow for the appointment of a special rapporteur to investigate events in Andijon.
- The calling of a high-level meeting of the United States, the European Union and Japan to discuss a joint political and aid strategy for Central Asia.
- A review of all engagement in Uzbekistan by the international financial institutions including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank.

We do not argue for the withdrawal of all aid from Uzbekistan, which will not help the people there. Aid is currently so limited that making it conditional is unlikely to have much effect on Uzbek policies. It is time however to consider some targeted sanctions if the Uzbeks do not agree to an investigation. Such sanctions could include visa and travel bans for those officials known to have been involved in the massacre and investigations into corrupt wealth held by Uzbek officials overseas. Those security units involved should not receive US training or equipment.

In recognition of the difficulties of implementing aid projects, particularly those that help civil society organisations and small groups, Congress might consider allowing USAID and the U.S. Embassy greater freedom to implement small grants in a manner that prevents them from being obstructed by the Uzbek government.

In the longer-term, a critical priority is to develop a strategy that both prepares Uzbekistan for change and tries to minimise the regional fallout of possible state failure there. All around the world we have seen the collapse of a country -- more often than not a state driven into the ground by a despotic ruler -- infect neighbouring countries and leading to widespread regional conflict that becomes extremely difficult to contain. We need to make sure this does not happen in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan has found it difficult to cope with 500 refugees. Imagine if the number were in the hundreds of thousands. If Uzbekistan does collapse, it would imperil efforts to bring stability and democracy to Afghanistan and it would risk creating a haven for extremists in what is already a dangerous neighbourhood. It would mean a worsening of drug trafficking and crime. It would be a direct threat to security around the world.

There are some steps that could be taken to ensure longer-term stability in the region:

- Work with the key neighbouring states -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan -- to start planning for possible conflict in Uzbekistan. Work to expand their capacity to handle natural and man-made disasters, including improving information and management systems and the pre-positioning of supplies to handle possible refugee flows.
- Expand educational contacts with Uzbekistan, including exchanges with all groups. Exposure to education in the United States, Europe or at such institutions as the American University in Bishkek can only help create a cadre of pro-Western thinkers who oppose what Karimov is doing to his country.
- Expand training of and support for local independent journalists, human rights activists, and lawyers, and the local NGOs that support them. We recognise the enormous obstacles the Uzbek government has put in the way of such efforts but believe they should continue.
- Expand training in key areas that would be needed to run any transition to democracy including civilian security and military experts, legal reform experts, parliamentary experts, civil service reform experts -- in short, all of the expertise that will be needed to overcome the legacies of Karimov's rule.

- Expand broadcasting to Uzbekistan in Uzbek and Russian to ensure that Uzbeks can get news and educational opportunities beyond what is offered by the state controlled media and schools.
- Start planning regional transport links in a way that means Uzbekistan cannot block trade and development. This would also help in the event of any disturbance in Uzbekistan. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are vulnerable to disruptions in road and rail transport in Uzbekistan. Both already suffer from Uzbek restrictions on trade.
- Work through the International Labour Organisation and corporate partners to end the use of forced and child labour to pick cotton -- this is a major source of grievances and economic distress in the Fergana valley.

Events in Andijon show that we cannot wait to come up with effective policies to stabilise Central Asia. All members of the OSCE need to come together to find ways to ensure that change comes peacefully and quickly to Uzbekistan and that its young people do not become a lost generation, without hope and drawn to extremism. We also need to work with other countries in the region to ensure that any possible violence in Uzbekistan does not become the spark that sets off a regional conflagration.