

**Statement by Rep. Christopher H. Smith,
Co-Chairman
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Unrest in Uzbekistan: Crisis and Prospects
May 19, 2005**

Almost a year ago, the Helsinki Commission held a hearing on Uzbekistan. At that time, we heard testimony about the closed nature of Uzbek society. Some of the consequences now seem to be unfolding in the Fergana Valley.

After Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, we may have become used to largely peaceful transfers of power in former Soviet republics. Clearly, as we read about the ongoing situation in Andijon, it was too good to be true. It seems to me, after the revolutions in the former USSR over the last 18 months and the bloody confrontation last Friday in Uzbekistan, that all bets are off in that country. We have now witnessed the most lethal use of force unleashed by an OSCE participating State against protestors in the former Soviet space.

In March 2002, when President Karimov came to Washington to sign the Agreement on Strategic Cooperation with the United States, I participated in his meeting with the congressional leadership. During that conversation, he said a very interesting thing. Responding to expressions of gratitude from Members of Congress for Uzbekistan's cooperation against international terrorism, President Karimov countered that he should be grateful to the United States, for getting rid of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. That, he explained, effectively ended the most serious security threat to Uzbekistan.

Yet, President Karimov never drew the appropriate conclusions from his own geopolitical premises. Instead of seeing the fall of the Taliban and their allies as an opportunity to loosen the state's grip on Uzbek society, he made gestures calculated to appease Western states calling for reform. For example, a few independent human rights groups were registered. Tashkent allowed the UN Rapporteur on Torture to visit the Uzbek penal system and some policemen who tortured detainees were themselves convicted and jailed.

But, Mr. Chairman, no fundamental changes have occurred. Though the UN Rapporteur concluded that torture was systemic in Uzbek jails and Tashkent drew up an action plan to combat torture, the practice continues. Last December's parliamentary election went much as did previous Uzbek elections -- even though Uzbek spokesmen and apologists proclaimed the participation of five government-created political parties to be major progress, the OSCE rightfully refused to send a full-fledged observer mission. No opposition parties were registered or allowed to take part. Individual members of opposition parties could not run, despite assurances from Uzbek officials that they would be able to do so.

Moreover, widespread religious persecution continues. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom recently recommended to Secretary of State Rice that Uzbekistan be designated a "country of particular concern" because of the severe, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom. I agree with this recommendation, as designating Uzbekistan would send a clear message that the United States will not tolerate the continued oppression of selected Muslims and other religious groups.

Today, almost 15 years after independence, Uzbekistan remains a police state. And President Karimov is confronting what I fear is only the beginning of a major challenge, largely of his own making. As we know, the US maintains a base in southern Uzbekistan. However, if peaceful protests spread throughout the country and Uzbek forces respond indiscriminately with deadly violence, the United States would be forced to reevaluate its strategic partnership with Uzbekistan.

Amidst all this gloom, I hope to hear some glimmer of good news from our witnesses. Absent that, I would settle for at least a wise policy recommendation.