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Unrest in Uzbekistan: Context and Implications

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Summary

This report examines the large-scale domestic unrest that occurred in eastern Uzbekistan in May 2005 that resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties. Implications for Uzbekistan and for its relations with the United States are examined. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Report RS21238, *Uzbekistan*; and CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia*, updated regularly.

Background

According to the Bush Administration, Uzbekistan is a “key strategic partner” in the Global War on Terror and “one of the most influential countries in Central Asia,” but its poor record on human rights, democracy, and religious freedom complicates ties with the United States. U.S. assistance aims to enhance Uzbekistan’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security; diminish the appeal of extremism by strengthening civil society and respect for human rights; bolster the development of natural resources such as oil; and address humanitarian needs.¹

U.S. policy aims to encourage the emergence of secular societal values in Uzbekistan that will facilitate peaceful and stable political change. However, the government of President Islam Karimov has made little progress in democratization, market reforms, and respect for human rights, according to the State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2004* and the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF’s) *Welfare Improvement Strategy for 2005-2010*. U.S. officials and others have raised concerns that this lack of progress could engender instability which might spread throughout the region and beyond, threaten the status of the coalition airbase at Karshi Khanabad (K2) that provides significant access to Afghanistan, and heighten the danger of the leakage through or from Uzbekistan of Soviet-era weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology or know-how.

¹ The State Department. *Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations for FY2006*.

The Karimov government has stressed that it has faced numerous threats from terrorists in recent years. In 1999, car bombings occurred in Tashkent, the capital, that the government claimed were carried out by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) terrorist group. In 1999 and 2000, IMU and other Islamic extremists mostly based in Afghanistan launched sorties against Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The IMU suffered major losses during U.S.-led coalition actions in Afghanistan in 2001-2002, but appears to be regaining some strength in recent months. An obscure Islamic Jihad Group of Uzbekistan (IJG; Jama'at al-Jihad al-Islami, composed of breakaway members of the IMU) claimed responsibility for another series of bombings and armed attacks in Uzbekistan in March-July 2004, including bombings at the U.S. and Israeli embassies. The Uzbek government also claimed that Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT; an Islamic fundamentalist movement ostensibly pledged to peace but banned in Uzbekistan) was involved. Several of those arrested testified that they had been trained at camps in Kazakhstan and Pakistan and that their leadership consorted with Taliban head Mohammad Omar, Uighur extremist Abu Mohammad, and Osama bin Laden. On May 25, 2005, the State Department pointed to this testimony and other evidence in designating IJG as a global terrorist group, and on June 1, 2005, the U.N. Security Council added IJG to its terrorism list. (For background, see CRS Report RS21218, *Violence in Uzbekistan in 2004*.)

Recent Developments

The immediate cause of the unrest in Andijon — the third largest city in Uzbekistan, with a population of about 300,000 — is linked to the arrests in mid-2004 of twenty-three prominent local businessmen who were charged with belonging to the “Akramiya” Islamic terrorist group and with involvement in the 1999 and 2004 bombings.² After the trial of the businessmen began in February 2005, over 100 witnesses testified that they were innocent, groups of family members and others held vigil at the courthouse, and the detainees began a hunger strike. On May 10, 2005, hundreds protested at the courthouse. Families and friends maintained that the defendants’ creation of a charity fund had brought them to the attention of local officials, who feared their popularity and coveted their assets. Perhaps lending some credence to this view, a reported 200 businessmen in Andijon had protested on April 1 against government corruption and other interference in private enterprise.³

After police on May 12 reportedly beat up and arrested some family members who were picketing the courthouse, several dozen people attacked a police station and seized weaponry. They then stormed a prison and released the defendants and over 500 other inmates. The government warned that IMU terrorists were among those freed. Many of these inmates apparently joined others in occupying the local administration building. The next day, several thousand people gathered in the main square in Andijon to hear

² The Akramiya movement was named after prominent local secondary school teacher Akram Yuldashev, who had been convicted in 1999 of involvement in the 1999 bombing. It is uncertain whether the movement is composed of active terrorists or loosely connected admirers of Yuldashev’s advice on Islamic worship and charity as contained in his pamphlet “The Path to Faith.” His admirers maintain that the advice is pacifistic and non-political. Karimov maintains that Akramiya is an offshoot of HT.

³ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*, April 5, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-236.

speeches from the released defendants and others. Allegedly, many of the protestors also demanded “democracy and jobs.”

President Karimov reportedly flew to Andijon on May 13 to direct security operations to restore control over government facilities. Dozens of civilians reportedly were killed or wounded during this crackdown. Many of the deaths occurred after Uzbek troops fired on demonstrators on the main square, according to international reporters on the scene and other credible observers. Late in the day, the government announced that it had restored order in the city. The official death tally is 173 people, including terrorists, civilians killed by the terrorists, and 36 police officers. President Karimov claimed on May 14 that government forces had not fired on unarmed civilians. On May 18, the interior ministry announced that 100 civilians had been killed by the “bandits,” and that another eight might have been killed by “stray bullets.” Numerous witnesses and human rights advocates have disputed the government accounts, claiming that hundreds of civilians were killed by arbitrary gunfire by government forces. The government reported in late May that it had detained or arrested 98 people (and convicted 52) in connection with the unrest in Andijon.⁴

More people were killed over the next few days during riots in other towns or while attempting to flee across Uzbek borders into Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. Protesters in Kara-Suu (a town straddling the border with Kyrgyzstan) burned government buildings on May 14. Uzbek troops re-entered the town on May 19 and arrested the unarmed members of a purported Islamic “terrorist” group that was keeping order in the town. These townsmen reportedly denied that they were linked to HT or other terrorist groups, but stated that they backed rule by Islamic law (Shariah). On May 20, several hundred demonstrators in Kara-Suu called for the release of the townsmen.

Implications for Uzbekistan

The Uzbek government argued that armed terrorists and criminals, including those released from the prison, had attempted to take over Andijon and that forceful government measures had been necessary to restore order. On May 24, Karimov asserted that these groups were financed and guided from abroad by HT and others who wanted to overthrow the constitutional and secular order in Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region. Analyst Martha Olcott testified that among the people who attacked the prison there may well have been terrorists trained in Afghanistan and linked to al Qaeda.⁵

Civil discontent has been increasing during recent months as economic conditions appear to worsen for many Uzbekistanis. Some observers warn that this internal political and economic instability, if not ameliorated, could result in the country becoming a “failed state,” where lawlessness and abject poverty prevail, whether or not Karimov exits

⁴ FBIS, May 14, Doc. No. CEP-27134; May 18, Doc. No. CEP-27011; and May 27, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-115; Human Rights Watch, *Bullets Were Falling Like Rain*, June 2005; Xinhua News Agency, May 28, 2005.

⁵ U.S. Congress. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission). *Briefing: Unrest in Uzbekistan*, May 19, 2005.

the scene.⁶ According to the IMF, poverty rates have hovered around 26-27% over the period 2000-2003, but rates in several regions, including Fergana and Tashkent, have increased. Perhaps more alarming, it reports that one-fifth of the population is malnourished and that 64% of pregnant females are anemic.⁷

Among political divisions in Uzbekistan are those between an urban and well-educated secular group (whether in government or opposition) and Islamic groups (whether moderate or extremist). Some observers warn that popular revulsion against the small secular pro-Karimov elite could result in Islamic interests coming to power, since the secular opposition is in disarray or in exile.⁸ Mohammad Solikh, the exiled head of Uzbekistan's banned Erk Party, has rejected such a scenario, stating that his party seeks a peaceful transition to democracy, and that the Uzbekistanis do not want Islamic rule. Perhaps indicating the rise of a moderate secular opposition, several prominent Uzbek businessmen and others — inspired by Kyrgyzstan's March 2005 "tulip revolution" — have formed the "Sunshine Uzbekistan" movement, which urges Karimov to replace his ministers and "toothless legislators" with reformers.⁹

On May 18, Karimov rejected a call by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan for an international inquiry into events in Andijon. Instead, Karimov directed his legislature to conduct a probe. Both China and Russia have concurred with Karimov that what happened in Andijon is solely Uzbekistan's "internal affair." The government allegedly has attempted to seal off Andijon from reporters and foreigners.

Among other international assessments, the External Relations Council of the EU on May 23 criticized "the reported excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by the Uzbek security forces," and warned that if the Uzbek government did not permit an international inquiry into the events in Andijon, it would "consider further steps." On May 31, NATO's Parliamentary Assembly more strongly "condemn[ed] the disproportionate use of force by Uzbek security forces against opposition protesters and civilians," and recommended that if Uzbekistan forbade an international inquiry, its membership in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council be "reconsidered" and NATO country support to its military be "reconsider[ed] and eventually suspend[ed]." Disappointed that the international community had not already imposed sanctions, the non-governmental International Crisis Group in late May stated that "the failed policies of muted criticism — and tacit support [of Karimov] — must be abandoned."¹⁰

Reflecting concerns that deepening instability in Uzbekistan could have regional repercussions, all the states bordering Uzbekistan hailed its re-establishment of law and order in Andijon. China and Russia also praised Karimov's "anti-terrorist" actions. New strains appeared in Uzbekistan's relations with Kyrgyzstan. Karimov on May 17 asserted

⁶ International Crisis Group, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, May 25, 2005.

⁷ International Monetary Fund. *Uzbekistan: Welfare Improvement Strategy*, March 2005.

⁸ Ariel Cohen, Heritage Foundation, May 13, 2005, [<http://www.heritage.org>].

⁹ *Agence France Presse*, May 19 and May 28, 2005. The Uzbek government brands Solikh a terrorist.

¹⁰ Council of the European Union. *Press Release*, May 24, 2005; NATO. Parliamentary Assembly. *Declaration on Uzbekistan*, May 31, 2005; *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*.

that the “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan had facilitated the flow of arms into Uzbekistan for terrorism and condemned Kyrgyzstan for harboring the fleeing “terrorists.” Kyrgyzstan was concerned that unrest might spread and increased its police patrols in the south of the country, where many ethnic Uzbeks and observant Muslims live. Reportedly, many Kyrgyzstanis in both the south and the north, perhaps remembering the civil disorder attending their “tulip revolution,” tended to support the re-establishment of law and order in Uzbekistan.

Implications for U.S. Interests

The U.S. government withheld early judgments about the attacks in Andijon but seemed to defer to Uzbekistan’s view that international terrorists had threatened the peace. The White House raised concerns that the “terrorists” who had broken out of the prison threatened U.S. interests, and also called for protesters to express their grievances peacefully. On May 18, however, the State Department emphasized that “it’s becoming apparent that very large numbers of civilians were killed by the indiscriminate use of force by Uzbek forces,” and that a “credible” inquiry should be launched. At the same time, it stressed that “nothing justified” the violent protests. Nonetheless, the State Department also argued that the United States had strategic interests in anti-terrorism cooperation with Uzbekistan and that continued engagement would be the best way to “insist” that Uzbekistan democratize, create free markets, and respect human rights. On May 31, President Bush appeared to reiterate this cautious position when he announced that he had asked the International Red Cross to go to Andijon “to determine what went on.”¹¹

The Overseas Basing Commission, in its *May 2005 Report*, suggested that U.S. national security could be enhanced by establishing Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs; military facilities with few or no U.S. personnel, but which may contain pre-positioned equipment) in Central Asia. However, it added that the risks to such CSLs posed by Islamic extremism must be carefully evaluated. Defense Department spokesman Bryon Whitman has stressed that access to K2 is “undeniably critical in supporting our combat operations” in Afghanistan. Evidence that such risks in Uzbekistan are being (re-)evaluated was provided by Gen. John P. Abizaid, head of U.S. Central Command, when he stated that there might be a “potential change in the security situation” following events in Andijon, and announced that operations at K2 would temporarily be scaled back.¹² Such heightened risks were underlined by the State Department’s warning on May 28 that it had received information that terrorists might be planning to attack U.S. interests in Uzbekistan soon.

Congressional concerns about human rights conditions in Uzbekistan have been reflected in legislation and other action. Omnibus Appropriations for FY2003 (P.L. 108-7) forbade FREEDOM Support Act assistance to the government of Uzbekistan unless the Secretary of State determined and reported that Uzbekistan was making substantial progress in meeting its commitments to democratize and respect human rights. The Secretary reported in May 2003 that Uzbekistan was making such progress, eliciting some

¹¹ The White House. *White House Briefing*, May 13, 2005; The State Department. *Daily Press Briefing*, May 18, 20, 24, and 26, 2005; The White House. *President’s Press Conference*, May 31, 2005.

¹² *Washington Post*, June 6, 2005; *Associated Press (AP)*, May 18, 2005.

criticism from Congress. This condition has been retained in Consolidated Appropriations for FY2004 (P.L. 108-199), and FY2005 (P.L. 108-447). For FY2004, the State Department announced in July 2004 that despite some “encouraging progress” in respecting human rights, some military and economic aid to Uzbekistan would be withheld because of lack of progress on democratic reform and restrictions on NGOs receiving U.S. assistance. In addition to FREEDOM Support Act aid, a finding of lack of progress triggered similar aid conditions on International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programs. About \$8.5 million was ultimately withheld. A decision is pending on withholding some FY2005 aid.

The cutoff of IMET and FMF aid was criticized by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, during a visit to Uzbekistan on August 12, 2004, as “shortsighted” and not “productive,” since it reduced U.S. military influence. Reportedly, he announced boosted nonproliferation aid of \$21 million and the transfer of fourteen patrol boats worth \$2.9 million, perhaps to reassure the Uzbeks of U.S. interest in their security. In testimony to the Helsinki Commission on May 19, 2005, Michael Cromartie of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom pointed to these disparate aid decisions and urged a “unified” U.S. policy toward Uzbekistan. Reportedly, some U.S.-trained Uzbek troops may have been involved in human rights abuses in Andijon, spurring some calls for restricting bilateral military assistance.¹³

Among other legislative conditions on aid to Uzbekistan, the Comprehensive Threat Reduction (CTR) Act (P.L. 103-160) requires CTR recipients to observe internationally recognized human rights. The National Defense Authorization Act for FY2003 (P.L. 107-314, Sec. 1306), however, permits the president a national security waiver. On December 30, 2003 (for FY2004), and on December 14, 2004 (for FY2005), the President concluded that Uzbekistan had committed human rights abuses, but exercised his waiver authority to permit it to receive continued CTR aid.

At a briefing of the Helsinki Commission on May 19, co-chairman Rep. Christopher Smith denounced the Uzbek government for the “most lethal violence” ever launched against protesters among countries belonging to the OSCE. He also cautioned that if unrest spread throughout Uzbekistan, the United States would be forced to re-consider the bilateral strategic relationship. Co-chairman Sen. Sam Brownback stressed that he had long endorsed the current U.S. policy of engagement with Uzbekistan, which includes encouraging the government to slowly and steadily make reform progress, but that such progress had not occurred. Nonetheless, he urged the Karimov government that it was not “too late ... to salvage the situation of liberalization for human rights, democracy and the economy.” Among other congressional action, Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and John Sununu visited Uzbekistan at the end of May and met with representatives of unregistered opposition parties. Uzbek government officials refused to meet them. The Members warned that U.S.-Uzbek relations could be harmed if the government spurns an international inquiry into the events in Andijon, and Sen. Sununu urged reforms, since the current “level of political and economic repression is unsustainable and it will only serve to stimulate discontent and unrest.”¹⁴

¹³ *AP*, May 28, 2005.

¹⁴ *AP*, May 30, 2005; *Washington Post*, June 6, 2005.