

Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising

I. OVERVIEW

On 13-14 May 2005, the government of Uzbekistan brutally suppressed a popular uprising in the eastern city of Andijon and the surrounding area. President Islam Karimov announced his forces had acted to end a revolt by Islamist extremists, yet the hundreds of victims -- possibly as many as 750 -- were mostly unarmed civilians, including many children. The uprising was not a one-off affair. It was the climax of six months in which especially ruinous economic policies produced demonstrations across the country. Nor is it likely to be the last serious bloodshed unless Western governments and international bodies press much harder for fundamentally different political and economic policies. Anger and frustration with the regime are tangible everywhere in Uzbekistan, and the explosion point is dangerously near.

The uprising began with protests over the trial of 23 local businessmen accused of involvement in Islamic extremism and acts against the state. Karimov was quick to blame Islamic groups, a theme eagerly adopted by the Russian government. However, there is no publicly available evidence for the involvement of jihadists: the businessmen were part of a self-help collective of entrepreneurs that, although motivated by religion, has shown no inclination to violence. Relatives of the men say the trial was motivated by their economic success and their growing power in the city due to their provision of charity to the less fortunate. The government has linked the protests and the 23 businessmen to the Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir organisation but has offered no evidence, and the businessmen's families deny any connection.

That an armed crowd broke into Andijon prison on 12 May 2005, freeing as many as 500 prisoners, was certainly a crime, but the government's response was to fire indiscriminately into unarmed, peaceful civilians who had gathered after the prison break. This seems to be when most of the civilian deaths occurred. The uprising comes after a period of rising tensions throughout Uzbekistan. Protests have taken place across the country in the past six months, mostly driven by government decrees that levied high tariffs on imports and restricted the activities of bazaar traders. In Uzbekistan's failing

economy, shuttle trading across borders is sometimes the only way people have of making a living. Worsening corruption and bureaucracy have prompted rising anger against the government, as have shortages of gas and electricity throughout a very cold winter.

Uzbeks face an increasingly repressive economic and political environment. Anyone who opposes the regime is liable to be accused of being an Islamist radical or terrorist. There are small numbers of both in Uzbekistan but the vast majority of protests have been by people angered by economic policies that have concentrated wealth in the hands of a tiny elite while stifling opportunities for others. Industry is in dire straits, foreign investment has evaporated, and agriculture provides almost no income for farmers. The World Bank calls Uzbekistan a "Low-Income Country under Stress", a polite term for a state at serious risk of failing. But the international community has been slow to recognise the dangers of instability.

Russia and China have strongly backed Karimov's approach, ignoring the reality that his failed economic policies and political restrictions have fuelled the potential for a serious Islamist opposition. U.S. policy has focused almost entirely on maintaining a strong security relationship, with far less attention to improving human rights, encouraging political reforms or opening the economy, thus inevitably undercutting these objectives and adding to some of the very risks that Washington says it is engaged in the region to prevent.

Unless Uzbekistan urgently adopts widespread economic and political reforms, it is likely to move with greater speed towards state failure. This would have a profound impact on all Central Asia, including Afghanistan. Chaos in the region would be the best possible outcome for a number of underground Islamist groups that are active in Uzbekistan and its neighbours.

As a first step toward assessing the true condition of the country, democratic governments and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Uzbekistan is a member, should press, following the lead of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, for an independent and international investigation into what happened in Andijon. If President Karimov continues to block such transparency, governments will

need to ask themselves whether the only way to avoid being tainted themselves by association with the Uzbek government, and to shock the Uzbek authorities into reform before it is too late, is to pull back their assistance and begin to distance themselves from the regime.

II. THE UPRISING

President Karimov and his supporters in the Russian and Chinese governments immediately tried to link the uprising to Islamic extremists. Family members of the 23 businessmen deny they were involved in anything other than a self-help group inspired by the leader of a religious reform movement who many years ago had an involvement with the radical but assertedly non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir. Assertions of connections to Islamic groups with links to Afghanistan and the Taliban are common in Uzbekistan but proof is rarely offered.¹

A. THE AKROMIYA MOVEMENT

In 1992, Akrom Yuldoshev, a former mathematician and one-time Hizb ut-Tahrir supporter from Andijon,² wrote a pamphlet entitled *Iymonga yul* (The path to faith) in which he presented his views on how genuine Muslims should live.³ An integral part of Yuldoshev's vision was the idea that Muslim entrepreneurs should cooperate rather than compete, pooling their money for the common good. Yuldoshev was briefly arrested in the mid-1990s, then re-arrested in the crackdown on religious activists that followed the February 1999 car bombings in Tashkent. He is still in prison on a weapons charge his supporters insist is trumped-up, and his tract has been branded extremist by the State Committee for Religious Affairs.

According to a noted Uzbek scholar, Yuldoshev's teachings formed the core of an organised religious reform movement in Andijon, the Akromiya movement, some of the methods and doctrines of which were

informed by its founder's years in Hizb ut-Tahrir.⁴ A recent pro-government publication goes much further, alleging that the group seeks to establish an Islamic state and allows drinking and drug abuse as a way of attracting followers.⁵ Some human rights defenders claim the movement is only a fabrication of the Uzbek security forces.⁶ On the whole, it seems that reality is somewhere in the middle: far from being an organised extremist movement seeking to overthrow the government, the Akromiya movement appears to have been a loose, informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young entrepreneurs, inspired by Yuldoshev's teachings to pool their resources for the benefit of their communities.⁷

In June-August 2004, Uzbek security forces arrested 23 young men in Andijon. Many were senior employees or directors of more than a dozen successful local businesses. One was Alijon (not his real name), deputy director of a fledgling building supplies company. He told Crisis Group his company started in 2003 but had already become profitable and had won praise from the local government for its positive contribution to the economy. He denied he was engaged in political or religious activity or had ever met Akrom Yuldoshev. "I was only busy with my company" he said. On 6 June 2004, as he was driving to work, his car was stopped by agents of the local National Security Service (NSS).⁸ The NSS took him to its headquarters, showed him pictures of several local businessmen, and asked if he knew any of them. "I knew one or two of them through business" he said, "and I told them so". This was sufficient for Alijon to be held incommunicado for 50 days. His company was audited but, he said, the investigation turned up no wrongdoing. "I asked one of the investigators, 'Why are you doing this to me? I haven't done anything', and he answered me: 'Brother, don't be

¹ For more information on Karimov's Uzbekistan, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°21, *Central Asia: Uzbekistan at Ten -- Repression and Instability*, 21 August 2001, Crisis Group Asia Report N°46, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program: Illusion or Reality?* 18 February 2003, and Crisis Group Asia Report N°76, *The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community*, 11 March 2004.

² According to his acquaintances, Yuldoshev had been a Hizb ut-Tahrir supporter as early as the late 1980s but broke with the organisation prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Crisis Group interviews, Andijon, 29 April 2005.

³ *Iymonga yul*, available at www.ozodovoz.org/uz/contents.php%3Fcid%3D75+%22Iymonga+yo%271%22+&hl=en.

⁴ See the 1999 article by Bakhtiyor Bobojonov, head of the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, "The Fergana Valley: Source or victim of Islamic fundamentalism", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, available at http://www.ca-c.org/data/eng/10.babad_zh.shtml.

⁵ A'zamjon Gadoyboyev, "Khalq yuli -- haq yuli" [The way of the people is the way of the truth] (Tashkent, 2004), pp. 175-176.

⁶ Crisis Group interview with Marat Zohidov, Chairperson of the unregistered Agrarian Party of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, 18 April 2005. See also Saidzhakhon Zainabidinov, "Obschina 'Akromiia' -- tendentsioznoe tvorchestvo uzbekskikh spetssluzhb i politologov" [The 'Akromiya' society is a tendentious creation of the Uzbek security forces and political scientists], *Fergana.ru* 5 April 2005, available at <http://centrasia.org/news/A.php4?st=1115619300>.

⁷ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003, p. 29.

⁸ The NSS is the successor agency of the Soviet KGB.

angry with me. I have orders, that's all".⁹ The men were accused of belonging to the Akromiya movement and seeking to overthrow the Uzbek government. Their trials began in February 2005.¹⁰

As the trials proceeded in Andijon, they were accompanied by large, silent demonstrations of relatives, neighbours, friends and former employees of the accused. The demonstrators carried no placards and made no vocal demands; they simply gathered by the hundreds every day outside the court, the men to one side, the women to the other. The demonstrations were remarkably well-organised, with participants contributing to supply food and drink, as well as wooden benches. Perhaps fearing an explosion, or simply hoping that these demonstrations, like others in the past, would simply fade away,¹¹ the authorities did not interfere. By mid-May, there were more than 3,000 demonstrators.¹²

Relatives and acquaintances of the accused insist that the 23 men on trial had done nothing illegal. On the contrary; their firms had been successful and were playing an important role in the economic development of the region. "The situation in the country is difficult now", one local man said. "That's no secret. All the state-run enterprises have shut down. These guys helped each other, and they helped others. They were trying to develop the domestic economy and reduce unemployment. These were the most profitable companies in Andijon".

The entrepreneurs likewise won recognition for good corporate citizenship and charitable activities. As one Andijon resident stated:

These companies always had positive balances. They gave their employees free meals and always paid their salaries on time. They helped with their employees' medical bills. They were benefactors of orphanages, schools, the elderly, and poor families.¹³

A former employee stated that his company regularly provided free holiday meals for the poor and made

monthly donations to the neighbourhood (*mahalla*) committee.

Asked about the Akromiya movement, most were openly scornful. "Akromiya consists of one man, Akrom Yuldoshev, and he's already in prison", a man said. "It's an invention," a woman said. "Our sons were arrested because someone wants more stars on his shoulders. They want to make it look like they're fighting terrorism". While many acknowledge the young men may well have been influenced by Yuldoshev's ideas of self-reliance, cooperation, and mutual assistance as obligatory for all true Muslims, they insist that neither the entrepreneurs' activities nor those ideas pose any threat to the state. "We're not opposed to Wahhabis or members of Hizb ut-Tahrir being arrested", one man said, continuing:

But what is the danger in [Yuldoshev's] ideas? This is all based on the opinion of some expert in Tashkent that [Yuldoshev's] book is extremist. Let him come and prove it! If it's true, fine, we will accept it. But if it's not true, they have to let our sons and brothers go. But what will happen if they let them go? All those months of investigation, all those people interrogated, all the thousands of people out of work because these firms have been closed -- somebody will have to answer for this.¹⁴

Indeed, the real danger for the Uzbek government came not from the activities of the alleged Akromiya members but from how local authorities handled the case. The demonstrations were peaceful in late April but the underlying anger and frustration was palpable.¹⁵ "Two of my sons were arrested -- for no reason!" said a woman. "There is no justice. That's why we're here. We want justice". "I'm out of work now -- I have been for four months" said a former employee. "I have four children at home, and I'm just sitting at home now. Where is the respect for the law, for the constitution, for the decrees of the president?" "This is what our children are seeing about our government and our system" another said. "The government is creating terrorists by its own actions".¹⁶

It seems entirely plausible that the young entrepreneurs were victims of their own success in a political environment where any independent public activity -- political, economic, cultural or otherwise -- is seen as a potential threat. The fact that they were funding schools and orphanages and aiding the poor in their communities -- in short, providing services that cash-strapped, often

⁹ Crisis Group interview with "Alijon", Karadariya Region, Kyrgyzstan, 19 May 2005.

¹⁰ Yusuf Rasulov and Matluba Azamatova, "Uzbekistan: Not the usual suspects", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Reporting Central Asia, No. 350, 18 February 2005, available at http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_350_1_eng.txt.

¹¹ Past trials of accused members of radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have led to small protests by relatives, usually female, of the accused but these generally have been broken up by the authorities with little or no difficulty.

¹² Communication from Tashkent, 11 May 2005, in Crisis Group possession.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Andijon, 29 April 2005.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Andijon, 29 April 2005.

¹⁵ According to demonstrators Crisis Group interviewed in Andijon on 29 April 2005, some individuals, whom the demonstrators said were "provocateurs" sent in by local authorities, urged the crowds to block the main street.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, *ibid*.

corrupt local administrations cannot or will not provide -- won them considerable local popularity. This was evidently a challenge local authorities felt they could not ignore.

B. THE WIDENING CRACKDOWN

The Andijon events had echoes elsewhere in the country and provided pretexts for crackdowns against other independently successful entrepreneurs. At 4:00 a.m. on 4 September 2004, heavily-armed NSS agents simultaneously raided the homes of twenty employees of the profitable Turon Productions furniture company, a branch of an Andijon business whose leadership had been caught up in the arrests there. The detainees were taken to NSS headquarters and forced to sign confessions that they were leaders of the Akromiya movement in Tashkent. A detainee recalls: "They told us, 'If you don't sign it, we'll prove it anyway. If we have to, we'll kill you. We're the NSS. We can do whatever we want to you'".

Ten detainees were then taken to the ministry of internal affairs, where they were forced to sign new confessions and sentenced to ten to fifteen days' detention. During this time, they were interrogated further by the NSS, sometimes by five or six agents at a time. "They brought us pre-prepared schemes of the organisation", one said. "They said it showed the organisational structure, with all our titles and positions. And they told us to sign it, and we'd go home in a few days -- otherwise, they'd lock us up for ten years". The documents, the detainee said, seem to have been based on the arrests in Andijon, with the names and addresses changed to those of the Tashkent detainees. "They said: 'This is what they said in Andijon, so you have to say it, too'".

On 2 February 2005, nine of the original twenty detainees were indicted for serious crimes, including membership in an extremist group and anti-constitutional activity. Six are reportedly still held incommunicado by the NSS. Accused Akromists interviewed by Crisis Group in Tashkent in April 2005 say they have been denied proper legal representation. "When they indicted me", one said, "they pointed to someone I've never seen before and said, 'This is your lawyer'. I've seen my lawyer only twice -- once when they indicted me and once when I wrote an official letter of rejection [of my appointed lawyer's services]. They threatened me then and told me they'd lock me up if I refused this lawyer". Another said, "Our lawyers themselves are telling us to just confess. They say they have no time to talk to us".

The accused likewise deny membership in the Akromiya movement or indeed any knowledge of it. "I'd never heard of Akrom Yuldoshev until now", one said. "They

put us all into this pre-prepared scheme. They say I was the once responsible for financing -- well, yes, I was the accountant at my firm, but they say I'm funding a terrorist group. All I did was pay taxes. There is no such group, and we're not involved in any religious activities". "He's written a book, they say", his colleague added. "They told me I had read it. But nobody's read it. They didn't even have a copy of it themselves. Nobody knows what's in it -- for all I know, it doesn't even exist. They just say he wrote some kind of book and forced us to sign statements that we had read it".

Asked why they were arrested, the accused seemed genuinely bewildered. "I've paid taxes, I filed all the necessary documentation for my firm, I've done everything according to the law," said one. "Our office was audited last year, and they found nothing wrong". Since the arrests, their companies remain closed. Even those who were not charged have reportedly not had their documents returned, denying them the opportunity to seek employment elsewhere. Requests for return of the documents as well as confiscated goods, including computers, cell phones and automobiles, have gone unanswered. "They keep promising to give them back, but never do", an accused said. "Our computer is sitting on the desk of [chief investigator Shukhrat] Ergashev -- he's actually using it! Every time he sees us he tells us what a great computer it is".¹⁷

C. ARRESTS

As the investigation of alleged members of Akromiya in Tashkent continued, the demonstrations in Andijon remained well-organised and peaceful but tensions were clearly mounting as the end of the trial drew near, with convictions expected for most, if not all defendants. Perhaps sensing the impending danger, the prosecutor-general of Andijon, Mirzoulughbek Zokirov, announced he was dropping one of the most serious charges and asked that three men be released. The court said it would delay issuing verdicts until the following week.¹⁸

This, however, appears to have been a delaying tactic designed to give the security forces time to act. According to a report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), NSS officials began arresting participants in the demonstrations on the night of 12 May. In response, friends and relatives again took to the

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview with accused members of Akromiya, Tashkent, 19 April 2005.

¹⁸ Matliuba Azamatova, "4 tysiachi chelovek pikitiruiut zdanie suda v podderzhku akromiitsev" [Four thousand picket courthouse in support of Akromists], *uznews.net*, 11 April 2005, available at <http://www.uznews.net/st190.htm>.

streets, overran a number of traffic police stations and seized weapons from a military garrison. Now armed, the crowd attempted to seize NSS headquarters but were driven back. That same night, however, an armed group stormed the prison where the defendants were being held, freeing them and hundreds of others as guards fled.¹⁹ Further arrests took place the following day.

Early on the morning of 13 May 2005, the crowds seized the provincial government (*hokimiyat*) building. Thousands gathered on the square as the uprising's leaders called for negotiations with the government and demanded that Akrom Yuldoshev be brought to Andijon to testify at the trial. "The authorities said he was the leader", a participant in the demonstration, now a refugee in Kyrgyzstan, said, "so we demanded that he come and tell the truth about the situation and say whether or not these men really were his people". Interior Minister Zokirjon Olmatov initially agreed to talk but refused to give in to the demands. "All he would offer us was a safe corridor to Kyrgyzstan if we agreed to leave", the refugee continued. "But we told him that we would not leave our homes and families".²⁰

The talks quickly broke down. On the evening of 13 May, armoured personnel carriers full of troops roared into the centre of town. Government forces reportedly fired indiscriminately into the crowd and began to storm the *hokimiyat* building. "They had sealed off all the roads leading away from the square", an eyewitness said, "so there was only one direction for the people to run". Other eyewitnesses report that the troops mowed down hundreds of fleeing civilians; men, women, and children alike. A large group, perhaps hoping that Olmatov's promised corridor was still open, fled on foot to the Kyrgyz border. As they neared the border village of Teshiktosh, they came under fire from Uzbek forces; eight were reportedly killed, several others wounded. Once the remainder made it to the bridge across the Karadarya River, Uzbek border guards appear to have let them cross unmolested. The group, numbering at least 541 in all,²¹ was housed in a refugee camp just on the Kyrgyz side.²²

¹⁹ Aina Gul Abdrakhmanova, Sultan Jumagulov, Alisher Saipov and Jalil Saparov, "Fleeing Uzbek residents say 'only death' awaits them back in Andijon"; Galima Bukharbaeva, "Blood flows in Uzbek crackdown", IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 377, 14 May 2005; Matliuba Azamatova, "Controversial trial triggered Uzbek violence", IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 376, 13 May 2005.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Karadarya Region, Kyrgyzstan, 19 May 2005.

²¹ See section II.D below.

²² Crisis Group interviews with Uzbek refugees, Karadarya Region, Kyrgyzstan, 19 May 2005.

By 14 May, the city's centre appeared to be largely under the control of the security forces. Sporadic fighting continued, however, in the suburbs and in nearby villages for another day.

D. THE AFTERMATH

Exact casualties from the Andijon violence are not yet known; eyewitnesses put the death toll in the hundreds. Official Uzbek figures put the number killed at 169, though the actual figure is certainly much higher.²³ There are reports of local schools being turned into makeshift morgues, of bodies being driven away by the truckload and of the bodies of slain women and children being secretly buried in mass graves.²⁴ No signs of these were visible on 18 May, when the government arranged a visit to Andijon for foreign diplomats and journalists. The visit was tightly controlled, and the visitors had no opportunity to talk with residents.²⁵

Within Uzbekistan, there are concerns that the government might respond to the Andijon events by clamping down even harder on human rights activists and independent journalists. Pressure on these two groups had already increased considerably following the Kyrgyz revolution. The recent arrest of Andijon-based human rights activist Saidjahon Zaynabitdinov may be a sign of what is to come. Head of the local human rights organisation Apelliatsiia (Appeal), Zaynabitdinov had repeatedly denounced the arrest and trial of the 23 entrepreneurs and the violence that followed the uprising. He was reportedly arrested on 21 May; it is not yet known what charges he is facing.²⁶

The Andijon uprising has the potential to spark further unrest in the region. On 14 May, angry crowds reportedly stormed Qorasuv town hall, taking the mayor hostage

²³ Uzbek Prosecutor-General Rashid Qodirov told a press conference on 17 May 2005 that 169 people had died, 32 of whom were government forces. He described the others killed as "terrorists". Nigora Hidoyatova, leader of the Free Farmers Party of Uzbekistan (FFPU), said 542 people died in Andijon and 203 in Pakhtabad. See Aziz Nuritov, "Uzbek Prosecutor -- 169 dead", Associated Press, Tashkent, 17 May 2005. The death toll almost certainly makes it the worst act of violence by a Central Asian state since independence.

²⁴ Galima Bukharbaeva and Matliuba Azamatova, "No requiem for the dead", IWPR, *Reporting Central Asia*, No. 378, 16 May 2005, available at http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_378_1_eng.txt.

²⁵ See "Diplomats inspect Uzbek city of Andijan after protest violence", ABC Radio, 19 May 2005, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2005/s1372071.htm>.

²⁶ See the 24 May 2005 statement by Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Rights defender in Andijan arrested," available at http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/05/24/uzbeki10999_txt.htm.

and setting fire to local police headquarters and the tax inspectorate.²⁷ They also rebuilt the destroyed section of the bridge across the Shakhrikhansay River, thus reopening the border to unrestricted trade. The action was apparently organised by Bakhtiyor Rahimov, a well-known farmer, businessman and informal community leader. In interviews with journalists, he made vague statements about establishing an Islamic society in Qorasuv,²⁸ but his main concern, like those of most residents, seems to have been the re-establishment of trade relations with the Kyrgyz side of the border. He reportedly harangued Kyrgyz border guards for checking the documents of Uzbek citizens crossing the rebuilt bridge.²⁹

The "Qorasuv Spring", however, was short-lived. On the morning of 19 May 2005, Uzbek special forces entered the town, arresting Rahimov and other leaders.³⁰ Though this was portrayed as peaceful in the international media, occasional gunfire could be heard from the Kyrgyz side. Uzbek border guards reappeared on their side of the bridge but for the time being continued to allow residents to cross, apparently recognising the potential for serious unrest. Rahimov was reportedly taken to Andijon. His arrest was followed by large demonstrations of support for him in the centre of Qorasuv.³¹

Since the crisis began, hundreds of refugees have crossed or attempted to cross the border into Kyrgyzstan. An initial group of 541 was registered by the Kyrgyz authorities on 14 May and housed in ten large tents 150 metres inside the border, in Karadariya. Of these, 491 remained in the camp as of 23 May, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The lower number is apparently due to the transfer of Kyrgyz citizens of Uzbek ethnicity from the camp, many of whom were reportedly taken by security personnel to Osh for interrogation.

The refugees are mostly young men (including some of the 23 accused members of Akromiya), with a small group of women and children. They report that the

Kyrgyz border guards have treated them well, and they are regularly given food, water and medical attention. Wounded refugees are receiving treatment in local hospitals. Kyrgyzstan's migration service has issued temporary identification documents but the refugees are under heavy guard and not allowed to leave the camp.³²

According to Kyrgyz law, authorities have six months to determine the status of asylum-seekers. Under the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol,³³ which Kyrgyzstan has signed, an individual who is outside his country of origin and has a well-founded fear of persecution if returned to that country must be legally recognised as a refugee and given protection.³⁴ On 19 May 2005, acting President Bakiev formally agreed with UNHCR to uphold Kyrgyzstan's international commitments and accept those who fled the Andijon violence until their status is determined, provided Bishkek receives significant international financial and diplomatic support.³⁵ There is little question that if the asylum-seekers are returned, many of them will face arrest and possibly torture at the hands of Uzbek authorities.

However, since that agreement, there have been a number of troubling signs that the government's resolve to keep the refugees is wavering in the face of strong pressure from Uzbekistan for their return.³⁶ Kyrgyz officials have issued contradictory public statements, with the presidential envoy to southern Kyrgyzstan quoted as saying, "We don't consider them refugees....We are trying to send them back".³⁷ Press reports indicate that Kyrgyz authorities have already turned back dozens of Uzbek citizens who have attempted to cross into Kyrgyzstan but were not among those initially admitted to the refugee camp.³⁸

²⁷ "V Karasu narodnoe vosstanie. Khokim v zalozhnikakh" ["A popular uprising in Qorasuv. The *hokim* is a hostage"], Fergana.ru, 14 May 2005, available at <http://www.fergana.ru/detail.php?id=1156&mode=snews>.

²⁸ See, for example, Jeremy Page, "They are afraid of the people now, we taught them a lesson", *The Times Online*, 18 May 2005, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-3-1616892-3,00.html>.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Karasuu, 19 May 2005.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Zhiteli Karasu prodolzhaiut aktsii protesta i zovut na pomoshch' zhurnalistov" ["Inhabitants of Qorasuv continue protests and call on journalists for help"], Fergana.ru, 21 May 2005, available at <http://www.fergana.ru/detail.php?id=1218&mode=snews>.

³² Crisis Group interviews with refugees, Karadariya Region, Kyrgyzstan, 19 May 2005.

³³ Available at www.unhcr.org.

³⁴ Article 1.F(b) of the 1951 Convention stipulates that an individual can be denied refugee status if there are "serious reasons" for believing he or she has committed a "serious non-political crime" prior to admission to the country of refuge.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 20 May 2005.

³⁶ The government is apparently divided into two camps, with President Bakiev, his national security advisor, and the deputy foreign minister willing to let the refugees stay, and the president's special envoy to the south, the head of the border guards, and the governor of Jalalabat pushing to send them back. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 23 May 2005.

³⁷ "Kyrgyzstan forces Uzbek refugees to return home", PA news, 23 May 2005.

³⁸ See "Kyrgyzstan hands over 84 refugees to Uzbekistan", Interfax, 22 May 2005. Reportedly Foreign Minister Otunbaeva has told a European ambassador that she believes the reports

Kyrgyz officials are concerned about the possibility Uzbekistan will take unilateral action to seize the refugees or otherwise destabilise the country. UNHCR has been pushing to relocate the camp further inside Kyrgyz territory, and this looks imminent. But international officials in Kyrgyzstan are worried that unless there is strong U.S. and European engagement in both Bishkek and Tashkent, Uzbek pressure may lead the Kyrgyz to return the refugees forcibly to Uzbekistan.³⁹

The uprising and its aftermath have left the international community uncertain how to respond. The U.S. called for restraint but also condemned the raid on the prison.⁴⁰ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recognised that the uprising may have resulted from government repression, saying:

We have been encouraging the Karimov government to make reforms, to make the system more open, to make it possible for people to have a political life. And this is a country that needs, in a sense, pressure valves that come from a more open system.⁴¹

The U.S. government has called for a full enquiry.⁴² UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said his government had "made it clear to the authorities in Uzbekistan that the repression of dissent and discontent is wrong, and they urgently need to deal with patent failings in respect to human and civil rights".⁴³ On 17 May, a European Union (EU) spokeswoman said military force was no way to resolve the conflict.⁴⁴ On 23 May the EU's External Relations Council issued a more strongly-worded statement, condemning "the reported excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by the Uzbek security forces" and calling on the Uzbek government "to respect their international commitments to democracy, the rule of law and human rights". The Council likewise expressed its concern over the Uzbek government's failure to respond to calls for an international investigation, stating that it would "consider further steps" depending on Karimov's ultimate response.⁴⁵

of returns are a "misunderstanding". Crisis Group interview with European ambassador, 24 May 2005.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, 20-23 May 2005.

⁴⁰ U.S. State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher in the daily press briefing, Washington, DC, 16 May 2005.

⁴¹ Quoted in Reuters. "Rice calls for political reform in Uzbekistan", 16 May 2005.

⁴² Statement from Richard Boucher, state department spokesman, 23 May 2005.

⁴³ Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, London, 14 May 2005.

⁴⁴ "EU deeply concerned over situation in Uzbekistan", Itar-Tass, 17 May 2005.

⁴⁵ External Relations Council conclusions concerning the situation in eastern Uzbekistan, Brussels, 23 May 2005.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov backed Karimov's version of events, saying: "Although the data is yet to be verified, an armed grouping that included militants from fundamentalist organisations and Talibs, among others, had long been planning an invasion of Uzbekistan's territory". He accused the attackers of using innocent people as a "live shield".⁴⁶ No evidence was presented for these assertions. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said Beijing was "delighted" the situation was again under control.⁴⁷

Clearly, the events in Andijon are of most immediate concern for neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Fears of instability spreading to southern Kyrgyzstan have prompted increased presence of security forces in the streets of Osh, the country's second-largest city. Many Osh residents, including ethnic Uzbeks, have expressed support for Karimov's crackdown.⁴⁸ Acting President Bakiyev stated that the Andijon events seemed to bear "the hallmarks of extremism".⁴⁹

III. BACKGROUND TO THE UPRISING

A. ISLAM IN KARIMOV'S UZBEKISTAN

Uzbek officials, including President Karimov, have been quick to blame the uprising on Islamist radicalism and "terrorism". This is standard in Uzbekistan, where anyone who opposes the government risks being accused of ties to Islamist groups. The two groups most commonly cited are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a violent terrorist organisation with links to the Taliban and al Qaeda that was decimated during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international Islamist group that has become popular in Uzbekistan. Hizb ut-Tahrir is inspired by a medieval vision of Islamic politics and wishes to replace current nation states by a Caliphate that would unite all Muslims. It insists it is a non-violent organisation, and no proof has ever been presented by the Uzbek government linking it to violence. Crisis Group has reported extensively on Islam in Central Asia.⁵⁰ Radical Islam has little support in Uzbekistan, a

⁴⁶ "Russia's Lavrov denies parallels between CIS revolutions, Uzbek events", Itar-Tass, Moscow, 17 May 2005.

⁴⁷ "FM Spokesman: China 'delighted to see Andijon turmoil under control'", *People's Daily* via Xinhua, 17 May 2005.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Osh, 15 and 16 May, 2005.

⁴⁹ Pirnazarov, "V Andizhane", op. cit.

⁵⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Asia Report N°59, *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, 10 July 2003; Crisis Group Asia Report N°66, *Youth in Central Asia: Losing the New Generation*, 31 October 2003; Crisis Group Asia Report N°72, *Is Radical Islam Inevitable in*

thoroughly secularised state with strong Russian influences from its time under Soviet rule. However, growing grievances about economic decline, corruption and official abuses and the banning of most secular opposition have forced some into the arms of Islamist groups.

Uzbekistan has imprisoned thousands on charges of ties to radical Islamist groups. While some certainly may have had links to groups like the IMU, human rights organisations have documented the jailing of some 7,000 people for the peaceful expression of religious beliefs, including 4,000 accused of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir.⁵¹ The use of torture is systematic in Uzbek prisons, so most confessions have to be disregarded. A charge of links to Islamist groups is often used to settle local scores, extort bribes or subdue legitimate political opposition.

Armed groups have carried out acts of violence in Uzbekistan, and some of these groups may have links to wider Islamist networks, although this has not been proved in open trials. A series of explosions and attacks on police checkpoints in Tashkent and Bukhara in March and April 2004 led to the arrest and trial of around 100 people. Human rights organisations have said many of the accused claim to be innocent and that they were tortured in prison to extract confessions.⁵²

B. THE ECONOMIC SQUEEZE

A recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission reported that economic performance was generally very good in 2004, as reflected in GDP growth of roughly 7.5 per cent.⁵³ Many other observers, however, are profoundly sceptical. "Yes, the GDP figures look good", a Western banker said, "but the question is, are these figures genuine?"⁵⁴, "I just don't see it, and neither do other businesspeople here", another said, adding "The real growth is probably 2 per cent at most, all in exports or government-driven construction projects".⁵⁵ Nor are official macroeconomic figures any guarantee of prosperity for the populace. As a Western diplomat in Tashkent pointed out, "Even the government of [Romanian dictator Nicolae] Ceaucescu had good macro-economic figures".⁵⁶ "Progress here has been

very limited, and we're very unhappy with this", another international financial institution representative said. "GDP growth here simply is not improving the lives of ordinary people".⁵⁷

As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks rely on bazaar trading to support themselves and their families. They sell mostly cheap, low-quality clothing from China, purchased at bazaars in the Kyrgyzstan portion of the shared Fergana Valley. Particularly popular with Uzbek shuttle traders is the huge bazaar in the Osh Province town of Karasuu, which borders on Andijon Province. This massive bazaar trade had traditionally taken place fairly informally, with little red tape and only fairly small flat taxes. Concerned about the outflow of hard currency, however, the government in 2002 began a clampdown on bazaars that has led to widespread discontent and increasing impoverishment, while benefiting the ruling elite by concentrating legal import-export activities in the hands of a few officials.⁵⁸

Among the new restrictions were:

- new tariffs on imported goods from 1 June 2002 and amounting to 50 per cent for food items and industrial equipment and 90 per cent for other goods. Anyone selling at the bazaar required a raft of new documents for imported goods, including health and safety certificates, and customs receipts; and
- a July 2003 decree that markets sell only foodstuffs, as this "...would give markets a civilised external view".⁵⁹ Clothes and other goods would have to be sold in shops or closed stands, to be built at markets for \$3,000 to \$5,000, a price few traders could afford.⁶⁰

Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement, 22 December 2003. See also Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°11, *The IMU and the Hizb ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, 30 January 2002; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°14, *Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security*, 1 March 2001.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch statement. New York, 10 August 2004.
⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See IMF Press Release No. 05/60, 15 March 2005.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 16 April 2005.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 19 April 2005.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 14 April 2005.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 21 April 2005.

⁵⁸ In its rankings of economic freedom, the Heritage Foundation places Uzbekistan 149th in the world, near North Korea, Myanmar, Libya and Zimbabwe. As noted above, the World Bank lists Uzbekistan as one of 30 countries at risk of becoming a failed state, though it uses somewhat politer terminology. "Evaluation of World Bank Support to Low-Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS): OED Approach Paper", December 2004, available at [http://Inweb18.worldbank.org/OED/oeddoelib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/880CE6C83835DF4685256F89005E79C9/\\$file/licus_approach_paper.pdf](http://Inweb18.worldbank.org/OED/oeddoelib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/880CE6C83835DF4685256F89005E79C9/$file/licus_approach_paper.pdf).

⁵⁹ Decree 330 of the cabinet of ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 28 July 2003. The phrase "civilised trade" has become something of a mantra for President Islam Karimov, who was formerly an economist with the Soviet state planning organisation Gosplan. Karimov has consistently rejected free enterprise in favour of state-organised trade. What this has meant in practice is not control of the economy by the state but the enrichment of various ministers and their cronies.

⁶⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan*, op. cit. Decree 1150, 20 June 2002, "On endorsement of

C. THE RESPONSE IN THE BAZAAR

In an unprecedented move, bazaar traders went on strike in July 2003 to protest the new measures. There were reports of scuffles between traders and police, and organisers of strikes and protests were reportedly arrested. The government also restricted wholesale trading to companies with a minimum capital of some \$25,000, an enormous amount for most small business people. Some bazaars were closed, and many business people had their goods confiscated, usually on spurious grounds of not meeting new certification requirements.⁶¹ Many suffered great losses as a result.

Since 2002, shuttle traders have faced increasing restrictions on border crossings.⁶² The borders to both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have frequently been closed or access made more restrictive and traders increasingly forced to cross illegally. In 2003 the Uzbek authorities blew up part of the bridge that joined the Kyrgyz market town of Karasuu to Qorasuv as well as several other nearby bridges over the Shakhrinsay River. Shuttle traders were left with two choices -- circuitous detours to the few still open border crossings, which involved bribes to both Uzbek and Kyrgyz border guards and customs officials, or illegal crossings of the Shakhrinsay. Two methods of the latter are most common. One is to walk out to the bridge's halfway point, climb down to its base, then leap across the remaining section of the narrow but fast-flowing river and scramble up a concrete embankment -- no mean feat if burdened with heavy sacks of goods. The other is to enlist the services of local "ferryman", who offer the opportunity of crossing the river on large inner tubes or in baskets attached to wires stretching from one bank to the other. Both methods are dangerous, and deaths by drowning are not uncommon.

Uzbek border guards sometimes turn a blind eye but are also known to demand bribes. Customs officials likewise take advantage to get first pick of goods passing back into Uzbekistan for the bazaar. "Gulbahor", a trader from Marghilon, said they often seize hundreds of dollars' worth of goods from her, without providing any documentation. "They'll just say, 'Oh, look, this would be

good for my son', or, 'My wife has been looking for shoes like these', and take them", she complained.⁶³

In 2004 the government launched new policies to clamp down on the trade. On 12 August, the cabinet of ministers issued Decree 387, which required all private individuals engaged in import and export to register with local tax authorities. It further stipulated that the sale of imported goods would only be allowed to individuals who were (1) in possession of an import-export license,⁶⁴ (2) could produce documents showing that all their goods had passed customs inspection, and (3) deposited all proceeds in bank accounts. The decree was to go into effect on 1 September 2004, and tax authorities were ordered to complete the registration process by 1 November.⁶⁵ Decree 413 followed on 2 September 2004, essentially confirming the earlier decree and adding that local tax committees and procurators were to impose "rigid" control over the activities of local traders.⁶⁶

Pressure on small individual traders was not limited to these decrees. In some cases, markets were physically destroyed. On 10 September 2004, on orders of the *hokim* (mayor), Saydullo Begaliyev, government bulldozers began demolishing some 600 trading booths near Andijon's congregational mosque. Protests had already begun three days earlier, when traders, mostly women, began demonstrations outside the state-run department store TsUM, where most rented retail space. The tearing down of street booths led to a further protest by over 100 traders, who blocked a main street. They were joined by a further 50 to 60 traders who had recently been forcibly displaced from the Kholis Bazaar. Some women threatened to set themselves on fire if they were not given new trading spaces. On 12 September, Begaliyev ordered TsUM closed, and the next day there were 500 demonstrators.

regulations of accounting and sale of goods imported by private persons", allowed goods imported before 6 May 2002 to be sold without new documents from the customs office and a quality certificate but was widely ignored. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report are in U.S. dollars.

⁶¹ Crisis Group Report, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program*, op. cit.

⁶² For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°43, *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*, 4 April 2002.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Qumtepa Bazaar, Marghilon, 28 April 2005.

⁶⁴ The acquisition of such a license is a complex process. First, the aspiring trader must pay a filing fee of five times the minimum wage (currently 6,530 sums, roughly \$6.50 per month), i.e., around \$33. Then, he or she must obtain proof of residence from the local administration. With proof of payment and residence in hand, an application for registration can be made to the local tax authorities, who in theory must accept or reject it within three days. If the application is accepted, the tax authorities issue a certificate of registration within a week; the aspiring trader must then obtain an import-export record card from tax authorities to engage in trade. This card must be surrendered each time the person leaves the country, even if he or she is doing so in order to purchase goods for import.

⁶⁵ Decree 387 of the cabinet of ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 12 August 2004.

⁶⁶ Decree 413 of the cabinet of ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2 September 2004.

In an effort to keep the situation from escalating out of control, Begaliyev met with 50 women protestors and promised new spaces at Andijon's Jahon Bazaar. He told them TsUM had been closed for "emergency repairs" and would soon be re-opened. Apparently mollified, the demonstrators dispersed.⁶⁷

The *hokim's* promises came to nothing. No written agreement about the new spaces was given; instead, the promised places were auctioned at prices too high for most small traders. When TsUM failed to reopen, tensions began to rise again. On 15 October 2004, 350 local traders sent an open letter to Karimov demanding documentary evidence of the need for emergency repairs at TsUM and that the store be reopened by 1 November or demonstrations would resume by 15 November.⁶⁸ In response, Begaliyev again met with local activists, telling them he had sold the store to a private investor and could not help them. He did, however, reportedly tell the women that if they could top the price -- the 250 million Uzbek sums (\$250,000) -- they could have TsUM.⁶⁹

On 1 November 2004, the deadline for enforcement of Decree 387, tax officials arrived at Kokand's main goods bazaar, demanding that traders present the required certificates for their goods or face confiscation. About ten traders had goods reportedly valued at several million sums (several thousand dollars) confiscated and placed in a nearby home. Word spread quickly, growing into rumours that the police were closing the entire bazaar. A large crowd of enraged traders soon gathered, breaking down the doors of the building where the confiscated goods were held. When police attempted to subdue the crowd, they were pelted with stones. The crowd, now in the thousands, then moved into the street, where it overturned and set on fire two police cars and advanced towards the city centre, showering police who tried to turn it back with stones. Calm was only restored when Mayor Ma'ruf Usmonov arrived and promised that enforcement of the decree would be temporarily suspended.⁷⁰

Police and tax inspectors sought the same day to confiscate unregistered goods and close Marghilon's Guravval Bazaar but were blocked by an estimated 100 traders. The local representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

(MIA) reportedly met with the demonstrators and promised tax inspectors would hold off for the time being.⁷¹

The troubles continued on 2 November, when authorities attempted to close the goods bazaar in the town of Fergana but were blocked by an estimated 1,000 people, mostly women. Some women doused themselves with gasoline and threatened to set themselves on fire.⁷² The demonstrators also reportedly seized the video camera of an MIA employee who was taping the demonstration. Police orders to disperse were ignored; the crowd departed only after Fergana Mayor Avazbek Ergashev promised to suspend implementation of the decree until 1 January 2005.⁷³

The Fergana Valley was not the only place to experience unrest when Decree 387 went into effect. Local traders at the Korvon Bazaar blocked roads leading into the central city of Bukhara, dispersing only after Mayor Karim Kamolov promised to "take measures" to address the matter. By the following day, the bazaar was reportedly operating normally.⁷⁴ In Jizzakh, a demonstration of some 100 traders was contained by police on 1 November, but a group of protestors met with Mayor Hakimjon Inomjonov, who reportedly promised to relay their concerns "to the top".⁷⁵ Similar disturbances were reported in Qarshi and the western province of Khorazm.⁷⁶ In the Amudaryo district of Qaraqalpaqstan, a nominally autonomous region in the west, the Manghit Bazaar was reportedly half-empty once the decree came into effect, with local traders claiming those with money and political connections were allowed to trade without interference, while tax inspectors hounded smaller traders out of the marketplace.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview with Matluba Azamatova, Correspondent, IWPR and BBC Uzbek Service, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews with bazaar merchants, Fergana, 22 December 2004.

⁷³ "Vaziyat hali ham notinch" [The situation is still not peaceful], *Erkin yurt*, 8 November 2004, available at <http://www.erkinyurt.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=856>. On 5 November 2004, a bomb threat was called in to Fergana province's Tax Inspectorate, causing the building to be evacuated. This was later revealed to have been a hoax. "Farghonada yana sarosimalik" [More worries in Fergana], *Erkin yurt*, 7 November 2004.

⁷⁴ Ozoda Rakhmatullaeva, "Bukharskie torgovtsy perekryli dorogu" [Bukharan traders blocked the road], *Tribune-uz*, available at <http://www.erkinyurt.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=831>.

⁷⁵ Press release No. 30 from human rights organisation Ezgulik (Benevolence), November 2004.

⁷⁶ Timur Salimov, "Uzbek city balks at government controls," IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 328, 26 November 2004.

⁷⁷ Said Abdurahmon, "Tadbirkorlar nega khafa?" [Why are the entrepreneurs upset?], *Erkin yurt*, 8 November 2004, available

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews with human rights activists, Andijon, 22 December 2004.

⁶⁸ "Sabr-toqatimiz tugadi!" [Our patience has run out!] *Erkin yurt*, 27 October 2004, available at <http://erkinyurt.org/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=810>.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview with human rights activists, Andijon, 22 December 2004.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews with eyewitnesses to Kokand riot, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

Unrest continued into the new year. On 5 January 2005, some 50 women traders protested across the street from the administration building of Shahrikhon district in Andijon province, reportedly because tax inspectors had chased them from their traditional streetside spots. Soon after they began giving interviews to foreign journalists, the deputy *hokim*, Usmonjon Tolibov, ordered police to disperse the demonstrators. The women were said to have been threatened for giving interviews. That same day local women got a promise from Tolibov to correct low gas pressure in their homes but reportedly nothing has been done.⁷⁸

Further protests broke out in February 2005, with demonstrators blocking roads near Samarkand and Bukhara and setting up roadblocks on major roads in Andijon.⁷⁹ Government attempts to demolish the Chuqur Bazaar in Samarkand likewise met with vigorous opposition. That bazaar is a labyrinth of small stalls, staffed almost exclusively by women selling cheap Chinese goods brought in from Kazakhstan. It abuts two of Samarkand's major tourist attractions, and the local government seems to have decided that it was an embarrassing eyesore. Discussions over moving it had been continuing for some time, with little result.⁸⁰

In early April, however, the city government appears to have decided to act, and bulldozers began digging out a section of the bazaar. Enraged, hundreds of women took to the streets, blocking the bulldozers and the airport road. The chief of police attempted to calm the crowd; according to one version, the women charged him, knocking him to the ground. The next day the bulldozers repaired the damage they had done, and the bazaar returned to normal.⁸¹

Demonstrations likewise broke out in the village of Marhamat in early April, when an estimated 100 to 200 traders, mostly women, blocked traffic at the major intersection. Local authorities had been demolishing the old bazaar, requiring traders to pay up to 250,000 Uzbek sums (\$250) for stalls in the new location that many said had been hastily and badly built. After about an hour,

the authorities placated the traders by offering land on the edge of the new bazaar where they could erect stalls. Most, however, saw this as a temporary concession. "Where's the guarantee they won't just come tomorrow and bulldoze the plot they gave me?" asked Murod. A local human rights activist concurs: "This won't last. The authorities will force them out sooner or later, and then we'll have still more protests".⁸²

D. GAS AND POWER SHORTAGES

It is not just bazaar traders who have been increasingly willing to take to the streets. The winter of 2004-2005 was particularly harsh and was accompanied by frequent interruptions in gas and electricity service throughout the country. Officials often said this was a result of non-payment by local customers, while many ordinary citizens complained that their miserly wages -- often issued late, or not at all -- forced them to choose between putting food on their families' tables or paying the utilities bill. There have also been suggestions -- angrily denied by officials of the state-run Uzneftegazdobycha company -- that reserves at the Shurtan gas field in Qashqadaryo province may be running low.⁸³

Whatever the reason, service interruptions plunged entire communities into cold and darkness and caused repeated confrontations with the authorities. On 1 December 2004, in the Andijon province village of Marhamat, some 300 people, angered at electricity cuts, blocked the Osh-Fergana highway and hurled stones at passing cars. A vehicle of the regional electric department was also attacked. Deputy Mayor Ma'rufjon Erkinboyev and chief electrician Abdurashid Abdughaniyev attempted to address the crowd but fled when attacked. No police showed up, though a local human rights activist called them when the crowd attacked Erkinboyev and Abdughaniyev. The electricity was switched back on, but participants in the demonstration have reportedly been called in to police stations and forced to write explanatory letters. No criminal charges have been filed but those with whom the police spoke were told the authorities would not be so lenient a second time.⁸⁴

On the evening of 2 December 2004, residents of the village of Bakht in Sirdaryo province, enraged that the local government had switched off electricity, blockaded

at <http://www.erkinyurt.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=856>.

⁷⁸ Press release No. 50 of the Uzbek human rights organisation Ezgulik (Benevolence), 5 January 2005.

⁷⁹ Tulkin Karaev, Yusuf Rasulov, and Zakirjon Ibraimov, "Uzbek gas flickers out," IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 352, 25 February 2005, available at http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_352_5_eng.txt.

⁸⁰ According to one account, a new site had been found and large sums of money spent preparing it before local health officials declared it unfit for use, as it had been the site of outbreaks of bubonic plague in the past.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Samarkand, 23-24 April 2005.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Marhamat, 29 April 2005.

⁸³ The Shurtan gas field, with an annual output of 60 million cubic metres, accounts for 90 per cent of Uzbekistan's natural gas production. Karaev, Rasulov, and Ibraimov, "Uzbek gas flickers out", op. cit.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview with human rights activist, Marhamat, 22 December 2004.

the Tashkent-Samarkand road with burning automobiles. They reportedly drove the police away by hurling rocks. Electricity was restored but the situation returned to normal only after the local *hokim* addressed the crowd, promising to give in to their demands.⁸⁵

On 6 December, some 50 people, mostly women, demonstrated in front of the *hokimiyat* of Shahrikhon district, Andijon province, expressing anger over low employment, miserly salaries, and frequent cuts in cooking gas, water, and electricity. Eyewitnesses report seeing two men in civilian clothes urging the women to throw stones at the *hokimiyat*; the women did not comply, and the men left. Eventually, a representative of the local administration met with them, promising to address their concerns, at which point the protest ended.⁸⁶

E. BANKING AND OTHER REGULATIONS

On 24 September 2004, the cabinet of ministers issued a decree calling for greater use of plastic debit cards in lieu of cash throughout Uzbekistan. Part of the decree held that retail spaces larger than 150 square metres would be issued licenses only if they had the capability to handle card transactions.⁸⁷ Articles in government-run newspapers touted the virtues of cards over cash.⁸⁸ Most people, however, remained sceptical. A local economist said:

It's far too early for these plastic cards.... We buy everything in the bazaars -- apples, bread, milk, butter, meat -- everything! If I want to buy a suit, will the seller take a card? Of course not, because then he would have to use the bank. They think that if we just act like a developed country, then everybody will think we are one. This is a pipe dream.⁸⁹

Others saw more sinister motives. An article on the website of the independent news agency Fergana.ru pointed out that the massive number of terminals needed would mean lucrative contracts for foreign companies,

with accompanying kickbacks for friends in the Uzbek government. The change would also give the shareholders and owners of major banks (reportedly well-represented in the upper levels of government) "ways and means of making money out of....thin air".⁹⁰

In some cases, employees of state-run enterprises were required to begin receiving part of their salaries in electronic form. According to Fergana.ru, "practically all the employees" of a mining concern in Zarafshon were required to receive their salaries in this form, which forced them to shop only where electronic transactions were possible -- and where prices were many times higher than in the bazaar.⁹¹

Some, perhaps wishing to give the government the benefit of the doubt, have suggested the initiative might be part of a genuine, albeit misguided, attempt at modernisation. There may be some truth to this, yet ultimately it was likely only to increase the desperation of Uzbekistan's poor, while further enriching a small elite. "It was a ridiculous exercise", said a Western businessman in Tashkent, "and it was abandoned after the IMF's visit in December. Then we all got a letter from [Deputy Prime Minister Rustam] Azimov stressing that the implementation of plastic cards was strictly voluntary, and we all understood that meant the project had been abandoned".⁹²

F. BORDER SECURITY

Other sources of tension have come from the Uzbek government's heavy-handed efforts to improve border security following the series of violent attacks in the spring and summer of 2004. Evidence that some of the perpetrators may have trained in Kazakhstan led to efforts to strengthen security along the Kazakh border, especially in Tashkent province.

On 18 December 2004, at a meeting of the cabinet of ministers, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev ordered local authorities to destroy several settlements near that border. Largely inhabited by pensioners, those settlements had been built in Soviet times, when borders between

⁸⁵ Shavkat Turon, "Stikhiinaia aktsiia protesta v Syrdare" [A spontaneous act of protest in Sirdaryo], *Ozod ovoz*, 12 December 2004, <http://www.CentrAsia.Ru/newsA.php4?st=1102849380>.

⁸⁶ Ezgulik press release No. 38, December 2004.

⁸⁷ "Cabinet issues resolution to boost cashless payment system", *UzReport.com*, 29 September 2004, <http://www.uzreport.com/E/index.cfm?sec=3&subsec=3>.

⁸⁸ Feruza Yorqin, "O'zbek matbuoti plastik kartochkalarni maqtayapti" [The Uzbek press is praising plastic cards], *Ozod ovoz*, 9 December 2004, available at <http://www.erkinyurt.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=939>.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview with economist, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

⁹⁰ Sergei Yezhkov, "Analytics: Uzbekistan: unprecedented swindle put into motion by bankers facilitates further enrichment of the administrative-financial elite and impoverishment of the majority of the population", *Fergana.ru*, 29 September 2004, available at <http://enews.ferghana.ru/4printer.php?id=628>.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Employees of Fergana State University, Fergana Polytechnical University, and public health clinics reportedly were required to receive 20 per cent of their salaries this way. Information received by Crisis Group from Fergana, February 2005.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 19 April 2005.

Union republics were largely administrative formalities. Local authorities carried out the order with characteristic brutality. No compensation was offered for destroyed homes; on the contrary, workers from nearby collective farms were told to tear down their neighbours' homes and that they could salvage building materials for their own use. In most cases, reportedly, demolition gangs turned back after being confronted by local residents, yet elsewhere government bulldozers did the job, heedless of protest.⁹³

G. AGRICULTURAL AND INDUSTRIAL DISTURBANCES

Challenges to corrupt local authorities have become increasingly common in many of Uzbekistan's regions. The largely unreformed agricultural sector, in which many farmers are in effect indentured servants to local administrations, is a significant source of popular unrest.⁹⁴ The situation is particularly acute in the province of Jizzakh, where the administration of Governor Ubaydullo Yomonqulov has been illegally, and sometimes brutally, seizing land for more than a year.⁹⁵ On 29 March 2005, Egamnazar Shoimonov, a member of the Uzbekistan Human Rights Association (UHRA) who had been organising his fellow local farmers for the past several months, was attacked and severely beaten by unknown assailants. After he was refused medical treatment by local hospitals, UHRA members took him to Tashkent, where, they say, they were forced to go from hospital to hospital before they found one willing to admit him. In Shoimonov's native Dustlik district, rumours spread that the popular farmer had been killed on the orders of the local administration. A crowd numbering in the hundreds converged on the administrative centre; police fled as it stormed their headquarters and set fire to two of their cars. The situation remained tense until Governor Yomonqulov assured the people that Shoimonov was alive and promised the farmers he would speed up reform in Jizzakh.⁹⁶

⁹³ Aleksei Volosevich, "It's like 1944 all over again...", Uzbek authorities are driving elderly persons from their homes", Ferghana.ru, 12 January 2005, available at <http://enews.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=39367658109.032,1741,15704379>; and Viktoria Isaeva, "The authorities of Uzbekistan mobilise population of local kishlaks to tear down dachas", Ferghana.ru, 17 January 2005, available at <http://enews.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=27522491644.082,2137,2117279>.

⁹⁴ For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°93, *The Curse of Cotton: Central Asia's Destructive Monoculture*, 28 February 2005.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews with Nigora Hidoyatova, Chairperson, FFPU, Tashkent, 18 April 2005, and Tolib Yoqubov, Chairperson, UHRA, Tashkent, 19 April 2005.

A much quieter confrontation took place in late April 2005 in the village of Shursuv, in the Uzbekiston district of Fergana province, where 350 employees of a factory went on a hunger strike to protest what they claimed was the unlawful sale of their shares in the factory. They claimed the former owner had secretly sold those shares to his relatives, and the new owners were planning to sell off the plant, causing economic disaster in a region with no other source of income. The protestors asserted the new owners had enlisted the help of the local police chief, Haliljon Hazratqulov, who was trying to get them to abandon their hunger strike, first by offering money, then by threatening arrest and worse.⁹⁷ A number of the hunger strikers fell ill, requiring hospitalisation. The strike was abandoned when a local court agreed to hear the case against the new owners.⁹⁸

IV. OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO UNREST

Prior to the Andijon uprising, the Uzbek government seemed reluctant to provoke further unrest by cracking down on demonstrations and their organisers. In many instances, it made light of the events leading up to the disturbances. A senior official of Kokand's tax inspectorate seemed remarkably sanguine about affairs in his city, denying his department had changed practices since the riot: "The disturbances were just a misunderstanding. The decree has not been stopped, and traders are being registered -- we've registered 90 per cent of them as of 20 December. They only said they'd stop enforcing the decree to calm people down".⁹⁹

Salomatkhon Abdulloeva, Deputy Mayor of Kokand, cast some doubt on this. "It may be true that 90 per cent of the larger traders have been registered, but the smaller ones, of whom there are thousands, probably are not registering", he said.¹⁰⁰ Traders interviewed in the Fergana goods bazaar in late December 2004 reported that no tax inspectors had come to register them or demand certificates since the disturbances. Asked if she

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews with hunger strikers, Shursuv, 28 April 2005. Uzbekiston District Police Chief Haliljon Hazratqulov denied the allegations against him, stating, "This is all lies and slander. I would never do this. I came from among the people. I'm a democrat". Crisis Group interview with Haliljon Hazratqulov, Yaypan, 28 April 2005.

⁹⁸ Matliuba Azamatova, "Rabochie v Fergane prekratili golodovku" ["Workers in Fergana have ended their hunger strike"], uznews.net, 2 May 2005, available at <http://www.uznews.net/st171.htm>.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview with tax official, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview with Salomatkhon Abdulloeva, Deputy Mayor, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

felt they had been frightened off, a trader laughed and replied, "They needed to be scared. Maybe now they'll treat us like people".¹⁰¹

Despite official protestations to the contrary, implementation of the decrees has in effect been suspended. This, however, has placed local officials in a difficult situation. As political appointees in a highly centralised system, they can hardly refuse to implement an order of the cabinet of ministers signed by President Karimov. Yet they have also seen the kind of reaction that heavy-handed efforts to implement the decrees provokes. At least until the May 2005 events in Andijon and Qorasuv, they have sought the path of least resistance -- registering larger, wealthier importers while leaving individual shuttle traders alone. They also reportedly embarked on an awareness-raising campaign in the local media, seeking to familiarise the populace with the new requirements.¹⁰² Some small traders have reportedly registered; others say they do pay taxes here and there, though nowhere near what the new decrees require, and that tax collectors do not seem inclined to press for more.¹⁰³

Conversations with local officials in late 2004 gave an indication of how the government seeks to portray the new decrees as necessary steps towards modernisation that are ultimately intended to increase traders' accountability and protect consumers:

Our goal is to put imported goods under control, because many imports do not have certificates, and can be dangerous for health. With some of the clothes people are bringing from China, if you light a match near them, they'll go up in flames or cause allergies. Those who import must answer for safety and cleanliness of their goods. They need to have legal status and legal accountability. Yes, we are charging higher import duties for individual traders than for legal entities. Why? Our goal is to encourage people to become legal entities with greater accountability. If someone can afford to act as an individual trader, fine, let him pay. We've been explaining this on television since September, but there were some misunderstandings.¹⁰⁴

Others insisted the decrees were intended to foster development of the local economy by promoting the sale of better-quality locally-produced goods:

It's hard to explain to people that they should buy better goods that may cost more but will last longer. But they really should do this. This is a decision made for the future -- it's to develop our country. It's not just for today, and people need to understand this.¹⁰⁵

Many local observers, however, scoffed at this, pointing out that, in addition to the danger such policies will provoke unrest, the collapse of light industry in the Fergana Valley means there are no locally-produced goods which could compete with foreign imports.

We Uzbeks have a saying. "Don't touch the cemetery, and don't touch the bazaar". It's as though the government were trying to provoke the people. Asking people to pay 90 per cent duties -- only a madman would do this! And now they say we should sell only Uzbek goods, but where are the Uzbek goods to replace the foreign ones?¹⁰⁶

Local human rights activists concurred. "Maybe these decrees will work for America or Germany", one said, "but they won't work for our small traders, who can't even afford to buy a cash register".¹⁰⁷

One after another, local traders, largely women, were outspoken in opposition to the new decrees, pointing out the potentially ruinous impact on their livelihoods. "The ruling is unfair", one said. "My husband is an invalid, so he can't work. My children are in school. If [Decree 387] is enforced, my children will have to leave school, we won't be able to feed or clothe ourselves, and we'll starve. We owe money for all things we sell. This is the only way we can make a living. We're not against the government, but this is wrong".¹⁰⁸ Some voiced fears verging on desperation. "If we didn't have this [shuttle trading], I don't know what we would do", a woman said. "Our men are in Russia, our children in the schools don't get stipends -- this is all we have. With this we can just barely make a living. If the decree goes into effect, we won't be able to feed ourselves".¹⁰⁹

The case of 32-year-old "Nodira" from Marghilon is fairly typical. A gynaecologist by training, she worked in a women's clinic, where her salary, she says, varied

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Fergana, 22 December 2004.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Fergana, January 2005.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews with traders in Qumtepa Bazaar, Marghilon, 28 April 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview with Ghani Rustamov, Deputy Governor of Fergana Province, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview with tax official, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview with economist, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview with human rights activist, Andijon, 22 December 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview with merchant, Fergana, 8 November 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview with merchant, Fergana, 22 December 2004.

from 15,000 to 18,000 sums (\$15-\$18) per month -- when she received it at all. She raises two children on her own, and her ex-husband is unemployed, so she receives no alimony or child support. As a result, she became a shuttle trader, buying women's clothing in Karasuu and selling it at Fergana's Juydam Bazaar. She says she gets her goods mostly from acquaintances in Karasuu who give her credit. She estimates the market value of her goods at 500,000 sums (\$500) but will never see this amount. At every step, she says, she must pay bribes -- to customs officials, border guards, and traffic police who routinely single out women returning from Karasuu. Sometimes, she says, Uzbek customs officials confiscate up to \$200 worth of goods at the border, and she estimates she loses another \$100 in bribes before they reach the bazaar. She says:

They're just not letting us trade normally, and we're sinking deeper and deeper into debt. If we traded strictly according to the law, there would be nothing left for us. I think these decrees are just inhumane. If the government thought even a little about the people, decrees like this would never have appeared. They're ruining the fates of thousands of human beings".¹¹⁰

Human rights activists were quick to point out the significance of the Kokand riots and seemed greatly encouraged by them:

Of course these disturbances were serious; the decree's implementation was stopped. If they hadn't been serious, if they were only a temporary aberration, the decree would have gone into effect. In the past, demonstrations were always done by women protesting their husbands' or sons' being held prisoner, and they were always dispersed with no result. *Now* look.¹¹¹

"We're surprised ourselves", said "Mashhura", a woman trader at Fergana's bazaar. "So far [local authorities] have been acting fairly. But if they come and tell us that they're going to force us to obey the decree, then we'll rise up again. We're sick of this".¹¹²

At least one local administrator, Kokand's Deputy Mayor Abdulloyeva, likewise seems aware of the context in which the decrees were issued:

Most of the demonstrators' demands weren't about the decree. They were about problems of everyday life. And the people are right. Of course the communal conditions are not good

and don't meet our demands. And our factories can't provide enough work for everybody. But we're looking at this. We're studying twelve regional factories to see if we can increase the number of jobs. We're hoping that there will be major changes between 2005 and 2007.¹¹³

A further sign of the fears the November 2004 unrest provoked may be the Fergana city government's decision -- taken immediately afterwards -- to tear down the existing goods bazaar on the outskirts of town and construct a new one in the city centre. This would make suppression of future unrest easier -- and require traders to rent or purchase new space, most likely at much higher prices. "Why are they moving the bazaar?", a woman trader asked. "It doesn't make any sense. People know we're here, they're used to coming here, so why move? I guess we'll have to move, though, and I'm sure it will be more expensive there".¹¹⁴

Government officials insist the decision to move the bazaar had nothing to do with the November disturbances:

The bazaar is being moved to make it more convenient for the people. The problem is that the land of the present bazaar is poor. It's waterlogged, and you can't build there. So people don't come. We need to put the bazaar in a convenient place and move it closer to the produce bazaar. This answers the demands of the time. Our goal is to create optimal conditions for sellers and buyers. We are doing this to create beneficial conditions for the people.¹¹⁵

Many look on this with scepticism. "This justification is something they thought of after the fact", a local economist said. "Where were they before with their great ideas? Why did they spend so much to build the [current] bazaar in the first place if its location is so bad?"¹¹⁶

To accommodate the new bazaar, authorities are demolishing homes in the centre of Fergana. Residents are being offered new dwellings on the outskirts, where living conditions are often poor. In some cases, the old homes are destroyed before new ones are provided. Some residents say they were not even warned in advance of the demolitions; one claims two daughters were injured by

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Marghilon, January 2005.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview with human rights activist, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Fergana, January 2005.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview with Salomatkhon Abdulloyeva, Deputy Mayor, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Fergana, 22 December 2004.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview with Ghani Rustamov, Deputy Governor of Fergana Province, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview with economist, Fergana, 23 December 2004.

a falling roof when the demolitions began unexpectedly.¹¹⁷ Moreover, compensation from the *hokimiyat* is often a fraction of what they paid for their homes. One resident was given 2.7 million sums (\$2,700) for a home he had bought for \$16,000.¹¹⁸

Following the November riot, fears of an impending crackdown were widespread. In early December 2004, there were rumours more than a dozen people had been arrested and tortured in Kokand. "The police did things to people that I wouldn't even wish on my worst enemy", a local said.¹¹⁹ An official of Fergana province's MIA acknowledged the ministry was investigating the disturbances but denied detentions and mistreatment, saying:

No one has been arrested, no one has been tortured. We are acting according to the law, and not a single person has even been charged. The rumours are not true. It is true that we are interviewing people -- we have interviewed over 1,000 people -- but we are trying not to go into their homes.¹²⁰

Local human rights activists interviewed in December 2004 and again in April 2005 concurred that they were unaware of any arrests in connection with the riots.¹²¹

The cautious response of the Uzbek government to past unrest and the galvanising effect of the Kyrgyz revolution in the first months of 2005 may have led to an exaggerated sense of confidence on the part of the regime's critics. Yet, there were also signs that the authorities' seeming tolerance of dissent had limits. On 3 May 2005, some 70 members of the Choriye family from the impoverished province of Qashqadaryo staged a protest in front of the U.S. embassy in Tashkent against the liquidation of their farming association by the provincial government.¹²² Police and NSS operatives who tried to disperse them were driven back with stones. The presence of a tent city outside the embassy of one of the government's main allies was a challenge the authorities could not ignore, however, and late that night police stormed the

encampment. Reports say they severely beat many of the demonstrators, who were mostly women and children.¹²³

V. CONCLUSION

The Andijon uprising and its bloody suppression should not have taken the international community by surprise. What occurred in Andijon was not an anomaly, but the latest, albeit most deadly, manifestation of the growing dissent and instability within Uzbekistan. The many warning signs were consistently ignored. The bazaar demonstrations and riots attracted a fair amount of international media attention when they broke out across the country in November 2004, but when the unrest died down, so too did the interest. On the eve of the Andijon uprising, Tashkent's diplomatic community was by and large dismissive of the trend. "Perhaps we are reading too much into these disturbances", a Western diplomat said. "People show displeasure in democracies as well. Local people showing their displeasure with heavy-handed administrators happens everywhere".¹²⁴

After the popular uprising that ended in the overthrow of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, many Western diplomats were sceptical of the potential for similar events in Uzbekistan:

There is absolutely no chance for a popular revolution here. You don't have the same dynamics as you did in Kyrgyzstan or Georgia or Ukraine. There is no organised opposition, there is no leading figure for people to rally around, and there is no tacit support from the power ministries. Yes, people are being pushed, and reactions are being seen, but these are very discrete, in reaction to specific things, and limited to very specific economic topics. They are not indicative of a larger trend towards greater unrest in the country, and there will probably be nothing to come for years and years.¹²⁵

The Uzbek government appears to have seen things differently. "The central government was simply terrified by the Kyrgyz events", a local observer says.¹²⁶ Evidence can be seen in the centre of Tashkent, where large parts of the central Sharof Rashidov street were torn up and

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Fergana, February 2005.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Fergana, February 2005. In some instances, authorities justify these prices by the poor condition of old homes. But the discrepancy is also due at least partially to the practice of purchasers and sellers lowering official prices to avoid paying higher taxes.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kokand, 21 December 2004.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview with Alijon Maqsudov, deputy chief for investigations, department of internal affairs, Fergana Province, Fergana, 22 December 2004.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews with human rights activists, Kokand, 21 December 2004 and 28 April 2005.

¹²² Malik Boboev, "Nebyvalyi piket v Tashkente", *uznews.net*, 3 May 2005, available at <http://www.uznews.net/st175.htm>.

¹²³ Galima Bukharbaeva, "Rasprava nad mirnoi demonstratsiei v Tashkente" ["Harsh treatment of a peaceful demonstration in Tashkent"], *uznews.net*, 5 May 2005, available at <http://www.uznews.net/st181.htm>.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, 19 April 2005.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview with Western diplomat, Tashkent, 15 April 2005.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 18 April 2005.

converted virtually overnight into parks, effectively blocking two major approaches to the town centre -- and to Independence Square, where the main offices of the Uzbek government are located.

The implications of the Kyrgyz events are not lost on Uzbek citizens either, some of whom express concerns that the government's repressive policies may produce far bloodier consequences than in the relatively peaceful revolution next door. "Didn't they see what happened in Kyrgyzstan?", a protestor in Andijon asked. "Don't they understand? There are only 5 million people in Kyrgyzstan. Here there are 25 million. If something happens here, none of them will be left alive".¹²⁷ And the government's brutal campaign against "extremism" may also ultimately backfire, as a Fergana resident implied: "I personally haven't seen any harm done by the Wahhabis or Hizb ut-Tahrir. But I've seen the harm done by the Prosecutor's Office, the MIA, and the NSS".¹²⁸

Although the situation in and around Andijon seems to have stabilised in recent days, it would be naïve to assume the challenges to Uzbekistan's stability have lessened. The anger and frustration which found their most violent manifestation in Andijon are tangible throughout the country, and the situation is not likely to improve without immediate political and economic reforms. The regime's claims to the contrary, the danger comes not from extremist groups, Islamist or otherwise, but from the continuing lack of reform. "The old command system is rotting -- you can practically smell it", one local says. "Reform is the only thing that can save the situation".¹²⁹ The EU's External Relations Council has likewise urged the Uzbek government "to carry out domestic reforms, which are essential for the social and economic development and the achievement of democracy and stability in the country."¹³⁰ Senator Sam Brownback, Chairperson of the U.S. Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, seems to concur:

President Karimov is at a crossroads. He can continue with his repressive policies, or he can move forward to reform the regime.¹³¹

The international community, too, needs to make decisions. For too long it has ignored the abuses of the Karimov regime and the signs that trouble was brewing in the country. This has not gone unnoticed in Uzbekistan.

"How can the United States give grants to support lawyers on the one hand and give grants to the Uzbek government to terrorise us on the other?" an Andijon resident wondered.¹³² Demands for reform are too late for the victims of the Andijon massacre, of course, but the time has come for the international community to reconsider seriously its relationship to the Karimov regime. The failed policies of muted criticism -- and tacit support -- must be abandoned.

Bishkek/Brussels, 25 May 2005

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Andijon, 29 April 2005.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Fergana, 30 April 2005.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, 18 April 2005.

¹³⁰ General Affairs and External Relations Council conclusions concerning the situation in eastern Uzbekistan, Brussels, 23 May 2005.

¹³¹ "Helsinki Commission probes Uzbek crisis", 19 May 2005, www.csce.gov.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Andijon, 29 April 2005. U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan is relatively small and has declined in the past several years. Assistance was \$219.8 million in 2002, but \$86.1 million in 2003 and is down to some \$38 million in 2005, of which \$11 million is earmarked for security assistance, at least some of which may be held back, as it was the previous year, because of unhappiness over the human rights record. A significant portion of the security assistance is for the cleanup of Soviet-era biological warfare and nuclear facilities and border control training. Nevertheless, there is a widespread perception among Uzbeks that the U.S. strongly backs an increasingly unpopular regime. This perception is fed by the prominence the regime gives to high-level visits and other contacts and belief that payments connected to the U.S. use of the military base at Khanabad also add significantly to the transfer of money.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF UZBEKISTAN

