

Uzbekistan: Briefing on human rights situation

Republic of Uzbekistan

Head of state: Islam Karimov
Capital: Tashkent
Population: 24.3 million
Official language: Uzbek
Death penalty: retentionist

President Islam Karimov was re-elected in January 2000 after elections in which there was no democratic competition, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The Uzbek government has not officially registered any political parties other than those aligned with the president, and organized political opposition is not tolerated. The media is subject to strict government censorship and there are no independent media.

Since Uzbekistan became independent in 1991, Amnesty International has addressed authorities there on a number of issues relating to the **detention or ill-treatment of opposition political figures and human rights activists; torture and ill-treatment** of detainees; **"disappearances"**, the **death penalty** and criminal **proceedings which fall short of international fair trial standards**.

The period from 1992 to 1995 was characterized by a serious **clampdown on political dissent** in Uzbekistan. Between 1994 and 1996 there was evidence of improvement in the treatment of opposition political activists, with a large number of imprisoned opposition activists benefiting from amnesties. Nevertheless, some political activists remained in detention, and at the same time official conduct towards religious activists harshened considerably. Amnesty International received increasing numbers of reports of **harassment of "independent" Muslims** who worshipped at mosques not under the direct control of the state-regulated Muslim Board. These reports include allegations of **short-term arbitrary arrests, interference with worship and Islamic teaching, beatings** and in some of the most serious cases, leaders of independent Islamic congregations were punished with **long periods of imprisonment** on apparently fabricated charges, or even **"disappeared"**. Although the Uzbek constitution guarantees the separation of state and religion, the activities of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, that regulates the religious life of the country, are effectively controlled by the government. The Uzbek authorities are opposed to all but this official, controlled form of Islam.

In December 1997 several murders of law enforcement officials in the Namangan region sparked a wave of **mass detentions and arrests of devout Muslims**. The authorities used the murders as a pretext for indiscriminately targeting so-called "Wahhabists". Hundreds were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in trials that fell far short of international fair trial standards. All those detained were said to have been **verbally abused, threatened, beaten and ill-treated in detention**. It was alleged that weapons and narcotics were openly planted on some of those detained in order to

fabricate a criminal case against them. Since then AI has documented a worrying rise in the number of reports of **arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture**, in particular of individuals suspected to be supporters of or sympathizers with banned Islamic opposition parties.

[The term “Wahhabi” has been used incorrectly, indiscriminately and pejoratively by governments throughout the former Soviet Union, including Uzbekistan, to describe radical opposition Islamic groups perceived as a threat to national security and stability. In this context the term does not refer to Muslims who practice Wahhabism (an orthodox form of Islam practised in South Arabia).]

In February 1999 bomb explosions in the capital Tashkent -- which killed 16 people -- triggered another wave of **arbitrary arrests of supposed conspirators**. AI was concerned that the authorities used the investigations into the bombings as a pretext to further clamp down on perceived sources of opposition to President Karimov and to intensify the campaign against the spread of radical Islamic opposition in Uzbekistan. The list of those reported to have been arrested, and allegedly **ill-treated and tortured** was extended to suspected supporters of the banned political opposition parties and movements *Erk* and *Birlik*, as well as alleged supporters of banned Islamic opposition parties and movements, such as *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, including members of their family, and independent human rights monitors. All the men tried and sentenced to death in connection with the bombings have reportedly been executed.

The clampdown on suspected sympathizers with banned Islamic opposition parties intensified following armed incursions by fighters of the banned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who crossed Kyrgyz territory from neighbouring Tajikistan on their way to Uzbekistan in August 1999. They took several hostages in Kyrgyzstan, including four Japanese nationals, and declared *ajihad* (holy war) on Uzbekistan. After two months of a military stand-off the hostages were released and the IMU withdrew from Kyrgyz territory. In August 2000 violent clashes broke out between the Uzbek armed forces and armed units of the IMU when they tried to enter southeastern Uzbekistan from neighbouring Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. **Detentions** of suspected sympathizers with the IMU and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, including women, have continued at an alarming rate. Thousands of devout Muslims convicted, after **unfair trials**, of membership of an illegal party, distribution of illegal religious literature and anti-state activities are currently serving **long prison sentences**.

In virtually all the cases that have come to the attention of Amnesty International, those detained have been **denied prompt access to a lawyer of their choice, to their families and to medical assistance**. Those with the responsibility to do so -- procurators, courts at all levels, and the parliamentary ombudsman -- have persistently **failed to launch timely, full and independent investigations** into widespread allegations of torture and ill-treatment. According to independent and credible sources, self-incriminating evidence reportedly extracted as a result of **torture** has been admitted routinely as evidence in trial proceedings and has provided the primary basis for a guilty verdict in many of the cases.

Amnesty International has been disturbed by public statements by Uzbek officials, including the President of Uzbekistan, in the wake of both the Namangan murders, the Tashkent bombings and the IMU incursions, which appear to **condone or encourage** the use of unlawful methods such as **torture and ill-treatment**. In April 1999, for example, President Karimov, portrayed as the guarantor of democracy and human rights, stated publicly that he was prepared to tear off the heads of two hundred

people in order to protect Uzbekistan's freedom and stability. Amnesty International is concerned that such statements -- together with the authorities' persistent failure to initiate impartial and thorough investigations into allegations of torture and ill-treatment -- give the signal that arbitrary arrest, torture and ill-treatment in general, and in particular of alleged supporters of banned secular political and Islamic opposition parties by law enforcement officials, are acceptable and even necessary, and that they can engage in such conduct with **impunity**.

Public statements by Uzbek officials have criminalized members and presumed members of independent Islamic congregations, their families and political opposition figures. On several occasions the Uzbek authorities, including the President, Interior Minister and Prosecutor General, have called on people involved in "non-traditional" Islamic groups and activities to come forward and "admit their guilt", threatening those who do not, and their families, with punishment. On 2 April 1999 President Karimov had reportedly said he would issue a decree allowing for the arrest of a suspect's father if the sons who were involved in "religious extremism" could not be found. "If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip off his head," he was quoted in the press as saying. Amnesty International is concerned that statements such as President Karimov's above have led to thousands of **arbitrary arrests** and have been **prejudicial to the outcome of scores of trials** of alleged members or supporters of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, the IMU, *Erk* and *Birlik*.

Amnesty International has raised its concerns about reports that devout Muslim prisoners are singled out for particularly **cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment** in places of detention, particularly in strict regime **prison camps**. According to relatives and former prisoners, upon arrival at a prison camp suspected "Wahhabists" or suspected members of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* are separated from other prisoners and made to run between two lines of guards who **beat them with truncheons** as they pass. There are also allegations that devout Muslim prisoners are subjected to **beatings, humiliation, forced labour and rape** by other prisoners with the complicity of prison authorities. They are forced to sing the national anthem and are severely beaten if they refuse to do so. There are consistent allegations that devout Muslim prisoners are **not allowed to read the Koran or to pray** in strict regime prison camps, and that they have their **beards forcibly shaved**. They are reportedly beaten or confined to punishment cells if they are caught praying.

Human rights groups reported several cases of **deaths in custody** -- in pre-trial detention or prison camps -- all of them as a result of **torture** or **ill-treatment** by law enforcement personnel. Reports from unofficial sources indicate that at least 20, and possibly as many as 38 prisoners, have died in Yaslik prison camp over the last two years as a result of torture and poor conditions. However, it has been difficult to confirm the exact causes of death independently.

In August 2000, after the IMU incursion, the Uzbek military, forcibly and without prior notice, rounded up and **resettled** thousands of mostly ethnic Tajik inhabitants from mountain villages in the southern Surkhandarynsk region on the border with Tajikistan, reportedly because armed units of the IMU had infiltrated these villages. The **villages were set on fire and bombed, livestock were killed, houses and fields destroyed**. In June 2001, 73 ethnic Tajik villagers, accused of supporting the IMU, were sentenced to long prison terms in four separate trials despite earlier government assurances to the UN Human Rights Committee that the action to evacuate the villagers was taken in order to improve the living conditions of the people concerned and that no criminal cases would be

opened against the forcibly displaced villagers. All of the 73 accused had been held incommunicado and alleged that they had been tortured in order to force them to confess.

The Uzbek authorities have to date failed to publish any statistics on the use of the **death penalty**, which remains classified as a state secret. AI is seriously concerned that Uzbekistan continues to pass death sentences and to execute those convicted. The fact that a substantial number of men sentenced to death have alleged that they were **tortured** in pre-trial detention greatly heightened this concern.

The organization is also concerned at the way in which **relatives of prisoners** condemned to death are treated by the Uzbek authorities causing unnecessary distress and in itself constituting cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The family is not informed of the date of execution and does not have the right to receive the body of the executed man, which is buried in an unmarked grave in an undisclosed location. In scores of cases, the family have not been notified of the death of the prisoner until months after the execution has taken place. In some cases the family may not even receive a death certificate.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>