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Uzbekistan: Only an independent investigation will reveal the truth of recent violence

Amnesty International strongly condemns the reported use of excessive force against civilians in Andizhan (Andijan) and calls on the authorities of Uzbekistan to allow a prompt and independent investigation into the events with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice.

The organization is gravely concerned at reports that scores of people -- men, women and children -- were killed when government troops opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in the evening of 13 May. Official reports talk about dozens of dead, mostly law enforcement officers, but according to eyewitnesses and hospital personnel in Andizhan, interviewed before all communications with Andizhan were cut off, as many as several hundred could have been killed with many more injured.

"The vast majority of the thousands of protestors gathered in the town's main square calling for justice and an end to poverty were unarmed and peaceful. Nevertheless troops are said to have opened fire on the crowd from armoured personnel carriers without warning, shooting indiscriminately at men, women and children as they fled from the main square in panic," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is greatly concerned that the Uzbekistani authorities will use the events in Andizhan to justify a further clampdown on dissent and freedom of expression in Uzbekistan and that this will lead to waves of arbitrary arrests nationwide in the name of "national security" and the "war against terror".

"Human rights defenders in Uzbekistan are warning that law enforcement officers are searching Andizhan for the alleged organizers of the demonstrations, conducting house to house searches and arbitrarily detaining anyone suspected of involvement or participation in the protests," Amnesty International said.

"The demonstrators and their families are at great risk of being arrested. Torture against detainees to obtain confessions is routine in Uzbekistan. After cutting off all communications with Andizhan and blocking access to the city, the authorities can act with impunity. "

Amnesty International is deeply worried that the authorities may again use excessive force in addressing civil unrest which erupted in Kara-Suu (Korasuv), a town on the border with Kyrgyzstan, over the weekend. The organization is calling on the authorities to use only proportionate force and as necessary to protect life according to the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

Background

During the night of 12-13 May 2005, a group of unidentified armed men broke into the jail of the city of Andizhan, reportedly freeing everyone inside -- an estimated 1,200 men. Later in the day soldiers were reported to have surrounded a crowd of several thousand protestors on the city's main square, demanding justice, freedom and an end to poverty. There were reports that gunfire was exchanged between armed men and soldiers and shots were apparently fired into the crowd. Reports as to what triggered the events in Andizhan are confusing but may have been linked to the trial of 23 local businessmen accused of "Islamic extremism". Amnesty International is monitoring the trial because of allegations of torture against the defendants. For the last week up to a thousand relatives and supporters of the 23 men, who deny any connection to banned Islamic groups, have held unprecedented peaceful sit-down vigils outside the court building to protest the men's innocence and denounce the torture they allegedly suffered.

In February 1999, the Uzbek authorities arrested Islamic and secular opposition supporters or sympathizers and their families, as well as members of independent Islamic congregations on the suspicion of being involved in bombings, which the authorities described as an assassination attempt on President Karimov. Thousands of devout Muslims are continuing to serve long prison sentences, convicted after unfair trials for anti-state activities.

In 2004, hundreds of men and women, said to be either devout Muslims or their relatives, were arbitrarily detained following a series of explosions and attacks on police checkpoints in the capital Tashkent and the city of Bukhara, and suicide bombings against the US and Israeli embassies. Dozens of men and women were sentenced in unfair trials on charges of "terrorism". Evidence was reportedly obtained under torture and admitted in court.

The Uzbek authorities linked the attacks to the country's cooperation in the US-led "war on terror". Despite this the US State Department stopped aid to the country in July 2004.

In April 2004, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development cut aid and investment because the Uzbek government failed to meet the Bank's human rights benchmarks.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe criticized the parliamentary elections, held in December 2004, as falling significantly short of international standards for democratic elections.

Death sentences and executions continue to take place in Uzbekistan.

Public Document

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