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## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **UZBEKISTAN**

#### **ARRESTS REPORTED FOLLOWING EXPLOSIONS IN TASHKENT**

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Uzbekistan to ensure that any individuals detained in connection with the 16 February explosions in the capital, Tashkent, are treated in accordance with the country's obligations under international law.

The explosions, in which at least 13 people died and more than a hundred were injured, were swiftly followed by allegations on the part of the authorities that they were the work of so-called Islamic extremists.

Amnesty International is concerned about persistent allegations of ill-treatment and other unfair trial practices surrounding the trials of alleged Islamic extremists during 1998. Such allegations are inconsistent with Uzbekistan's undertakings as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Convention against Torture.

There have been unconfirmed reports of at least five arrests following the explosions on 16 February, and two people, a man and a woman, are officially wanted for questioning.

Both are from the southern Fergana region, where the murder of several officials at the end of 1997 resulted in mass detentions. Scores of men were subsequently sentenced to long terms of imprisonment on charges including terrorism, attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and seeking to establish an Islamist state, and one man was sentenced to death.

According to reports received by Amnesty International, in all the trials there were allegations that defendants had been beaten and otherwise ill-treated in detention, and forced to confess under duress. The organization is not aware that these allegations have been investigated by the relevant Uzbek authorities.

Amnesty International is concerned that people may have been imprisoned solely for their alleged affiliation to independent Islamic congregations. President Karimov has repeatedly condemned the perceived spread in Uzbekistan of adherence to "Wahhabism", a strict form of Islam. On 1 May 1998 he endorsed tough measures against "those who are trying by any means to introduce political Islam, religious extremism and fanaticism" and reportedly told parliament that "fundamentalists should be shot".

Under a new law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations adopted by parliament the same day, anyone organizing an unregistered religious group can receive up to five years in prison, while private religious teaching or missionary activity can attract a three-year prison sentence.

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