

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Uzbekistan: Fear for safety of detainees and refugees

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of dozens of people reportedly detained arbitrarily by law enforcement officers for their alleged participation in the 13 May events in Andizhan. The prosecutor general told a news conference in Tashkent on 17 May that 81 people had so far been detained, all of them reportedly insurgents, and that a criminal case had been opened against them on charges of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order, organizing mass disturbances and committing murder as access to and communications with Andizhan are still difficult. It is not clear whether those detained have had access to a lawyer, medical assistance or their relatives or whether they are being held incommunicado. The risk of torture is particularly high during incommunicado detention and Amnesty International has received hundreds of reports over the last few years of detainees being tortured while held incommunicado in pre-trial detention in order to force them to confess to membership of an illegal Islamic organization. The Uzbekistani authorities have accused members and supporters of the local Akramia Islamic movement of attempting to organize a violent uprising in Andizhan with a view to establishing an Islamic State in Uzbekistan. They have also linked this movement to the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir opposition Islamic party, categorized by Uzbekistan as a terrorist organization.

Amnesty International was particularly disturbed at reports from Uzbekistan that at least three human rights defenders were among those detained in Andizhan in relation to the 13 May demonstrations and is concerned that they may have been arrested for their human rights activities: local human rights defenders had monitored events in Andizhan, including the reported indiscriminate and excessive use of force by government troops against mainly unarmed civilian demonstrators and had tried to publicize their findings at personal risk.

The Uzbekistani authorities have denied that government troops used excessive force and that they killed civilians, including women and children. According to the Minister of Internal Affairs on 18 May, 170 people were killed during armed clashes between troops and rebels in Andizhan, including 37 law enforcement officers, as well as passers-by shot reportedly by the insurgents. Three women and two teenage boys were included in the official death toll -- they had reportedly been held as hostages by the insurgents. These official reports are in stark contrast to allegations by eye-witnesses that troops fired indiscriminately and without warning at the crowd of demonstrators gathered in the centre of Andizhan. Unofficial sources have estimated the death toll to be at least 500. Survivors, who fled from Andizhan to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, have told journalists that soldiers continued to shoot at people indiscriminately even as they were running for safety. Amnesty International is disturbed by reports that soldiers may have extrajudicially executed demonstrators. Journalists from the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), an international non-governmental press organization, interviewed eyewitnesses who described soldiers killing demonstrators with a single shot to the head as they were lying on the ground wounded.

Amnesty International is also gravely concerned at reports that government forces shot at people

trying to cross the border to Kyrgyzstan. A man interviewed by IWPR who was wounded as he tried to cross into Kyrgyzstan with a group of demonstrators fleeing Andizhan claimed that Uzbekistani law enforcement officers opened fire without warning as they were approaching the border in the village of Teshiktash. He said that at least two women and three men were killed in that incident. Amnesty International is urging the government of Kyrgyzstan to do everything in their power to guarantee the safety and protection of those seeking refuge on their territory and to ensure that they are not returned to Uzbekistan where they would be at risk of human rights violations.

Eyewitness reports such as those above add ever more urgency to Amnesty International's calls for the Uzbekistani authorities to allow independent public scrutiny of its agents' actions and to conduct a prompt, transparent and independent investigation, with the participation of international experts, into these events with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice. Amnesty International notes that the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights "also urges the conduct of an independent investigation into the causes and circumstances of the incidents in eastern Uzbekistan".

This public statement updates AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL's PRESS RELEASE *Uzbekistan: Only an independent investigation will reveal the truth of recent violence*, AI Index: EUR 62/008/2005
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur620082005>