

Urgent Action In Focus

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Blood on the streets: The aftermath of the killings in Andizhan



People gathering at the "bravery" statue in Tashkent to mark 40 days since the killings in Andizhan. © Private

"When the shooting started we lay down in the street. The street was running with blood and rain. We were soaked in blood and rain. We were in shock."

(Testimony of Uzbekistani eyewitness interviewed by Amnesty International)

During the night of 12-13 May, a group of unidentified armed men broke into the jail of the city of Andizhan in eastern Uzbekistan, reportedly freeing several hundred prisoners. The group attacked government buildings, including a regional government building on the main city square, and took a number of hostages. They allegedly exchanged gunfire with soldiers. From the early hours of 13 May, thousands of civilians - mostly unarmed and including some who

had escaped from the prison - gathered in the city square, where many spoke out to demand justice and an end to poverty. In the early evening, the security forces surrounded the demonstrators and started to shoot indiscriminately at the crowd. The demonstrators attempted to flee. Hundreds of men, women and children were reportedly killed. One eyewitness told Amnesty International that a child and a pregnant woman had been shot next to him. Other reports

speak of armoured personnel carriers being deliberately driven over the bodies of the dead and wounded. One of those who escaped Andizhan after the violence summed up the shock of those who witnessed the killings: "We could not believe that our own people were shooting at us. We thought that they must be zombies."

Following the events in Andizhan, hundreds of people fled from Uzbekistan. Most of these people sought international protection in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Many others have been intimidated or detained in order to prevent them talking about what happened.

"How could I give the order to shoot at my beloved people?"

The account given by the government differs dramatically from the eyewitness testimonies Amnesty International has gathered. The government maintains that the violence resulted from the actions of armed "terrorists" intent on establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. According to the government's account, the security forces did not kill any civilians, and all those civilians who lost their lives were killed by these "terrorists". Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, reportedly said "How could I give the order to shoot at my beloved people?" The government claims that 187 people, many of whom were terrorists, died in the violence. This is considerably lower than the estimates put forward by international organizations, based on interviews with refugees from Andizhan who fled to Kyrgyzstan. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) has estimated that between 300 and 500 people were killed as a result of the events in Andizhan. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has also reported that hundreds of people may have been killed. The government of Uzbekistan has not

released the names of those who died; nor has it helped those trying to trace missing relatives by publishing the names of those detained or those who were in hospital.

The government has gone to great lengths to prevent information that contradicts the official version of events from reaching the outside world. There were unconfirmed reports that the bodies of those killed were removed from the city and secretly buried in unknown locations. Records and documents relating to the events were reportedly destroyed, and law enforcement officers threatened witnesses with violence and detention if they spoke to journalists about their experiences. The authorities in Andizhan also prevented international journalists and human rights defenders from getting to the city, and harassed local independent journalists and human rights defenders, in an effort to prevent them from reporting on the events in Andizhan. They even blocked access to websites which provided differing accounts of the events, or which were critical of the authorities. Some human rights defenders in Uzbekistan have been charged with serious criminal offences for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International is campaigning for their release, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for carrying out their peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

One such prisoner of conscience is Saidzhakhon Zainabitdinov, the chairperson of the independent human rights organisation *Appeliatsia* (Appeal), based in Andizhan. He was detained on 21 May after giving a public account to the international media about the events of 13 May, which contrasted starkly with the government's version. He has been charged with spreading information with the aim of causing panic, and with terrorism, which is a capital offence. Amnesty International has issued a UA and a web action on his behalf (UA 138/05, EUR 62/012/2005, 25 May 2005;

see hyperlink below for web action). Saidzhakhon Zainabitdinov is now known to be held at a pre-trial detention centre known as SIZO Number 1, in the capital, Tashkent. His lawyer and family still have not been given access to him, and it is unclear whether he has access to medical treatment. He and all those detained are at risk of being sentenced to death – and even executed – following an unfair trial.



Saidzhakhon Zainabitdinov, © Private

Amnesty International is among many international organizations condemning the crackdown on those who have spoken out about human rights violations, and is calling for an independent international enquiry in order to establish the truth about what happened in Andizhan in May. Amnesty International's researcher on Uzbekistan, Maisy Weicherding, says, "The truth is under siege. The government wants to prevent the truth about what really happened in Andizhan from coming out."

The plight of Uzbekistani refugees in Kyrgyzstan

In the days after the violence in Andizhan, hundreds of men, women and children made their way to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan to seek refuge. Most were citizens of Uzbekistan, although a number of Kyrgyzstan nationals who were in Andizhan on 13 May are known

to have been among them. The Uzbekistani authorities have continued their attempts to suppress the truth about the events in Andizhan by pursuing them across the border, claiming that many of the refugees are criminals who had a part in planning the "uprising". They have alleged that this "uprising" was planned abroad, and that some of the organizers may be hiding in Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation.

Criminalized

Amnesty International has recorded evidence of the actions taken to criminalize many of those who have sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan following the crackdown in Uzbekistan. As many refugees tried to cross the border on foot, the Uzbekistani authorities reportedly notified Kyrgyz border guards that 500 armed convicts had broken out of prison in Andizhan and were heading for the border with Kyrgyzstan. However, the head of the National Security Service in Suzak district in Kyrgyzstan, where the refugees crossed the border, claims that border guards checked each person for weapons as they entered the country, and found none. Even though the refugees were apparently non-violent, some who spoke to Amnesty International claimed that Uzbekistani government forces shot at them as they were trying to cross the border, killing at least eight people.

Those who made it across the border and into the refugee camp set up in Kyrgyzstan were not necessarily safe from the Uzbekistani authorities. Uzbekistani media reports, which are one of the main sources of information in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan, described the refugee camp as a "terrorist" camp run by "dangerous criminals". The Uzbekistani authorities have published a list of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan nationals wanted for questioning in connection with the events in Andizhan. Many of those on the list are now believed to be among the estimated

1,000 refugees from Andizhan who are in hiding. The "hidden" refugees apparently include people who were wounded in Andizhan on 13 May; people who participated in the demonstrations or witnessed them; people who had been pressured in Andizhan because family members were unaccounted for since the 13 May events; people who had reported on the events to the media or human rights groups; people who had previously been imprisoned on religious grounds, who were being harassed by association after 13 May; and people with relatives in Kyrgyzstan.

In July, two Kyrgyzstani men whose names appear on the "wanted" list were discovered in detention centre in the Kyrgyzstani city of Osh, illegally detained on an arrest warrant sanctioned by the Prosecutor of Andizhan. One of the men showed signs of having been severely beaten. He said that after he had asked for a lawyer he had been taken to the basement of the detention centre and beaten by Uzbekistani officials who said they were from the National Security Service (SNB). On 13 July, the Governor of Osh region told international news agencies that he was unaware of any activity by Uzbekistani law enforcement officials on the territory of Kyrgyzstan. However, Amnesty International received information suggesting that the Uzbekistani SNB was occupying premises within the building of the Osh regional prosecutor's office.

Pursued

Those refugees who were not branded as criminals were pursued and monitored by the Uzbekistani authorities (see UA 141/05, EUR 58/001/2005, 27 May 2005, and follow-ups). Though the names of those in the camp should have been kept confidential, disturbingly, lists of people in the camp, including their addresses in Uzbekistan, were believed to have been handed over to the Uzbekistani security services by Kyrgyzstani officials. The lists were passed to neighbourhood

committees (*mahallas*) in Andizhan and were used to put pressure on the families of individual refugees to persuade them to return to Uzbekistan "voluntarily". The refugees' relatives were bussed to the refugee camp, accompanied by Uzbekistani SNB officers, who watched as they tried to persuade their relatives to return with them to Uzbekistan. Armed local people also reportedly entered the camp and threatened to force the refugees out if they did not return to Uzbekistan voluntarily. Uzbekistani security forces were seen outside the camp, and plainclothes Uzbekistani officers were able to infiltrate the camp.

On 29 July, 439 refugees were airlifted out of the camp to a holding centre in Romania. They are still awaiting permanent resettlement in other European countries. This left 15 asylum-seekers in detention in Kyrgyzstan. Of these, 11 were evacuated on 16 September, and have been offered permanent asylum in Belgium, Finland and the Netherlands. However, the status of the other four Uzbekistani men remains in dispute and they are still detained in Kyrgyzstan.

Amnesty International was concerned that the Kyrgyz government was failing in its obligations to guarantee the refugees' protection and safety. Despite official guarantees given to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that temporary protection would be offered to the initial group of refugees, on 9 June four men were deported to Uzbekistan. They were initially reported to have been held incommunicado in Andizhan prison. In late July, Amnesty International received reports that one of the four, Tavakkal Gadzhiev, had been transferred from prison to intensive care in an Andizhan hospital, allegedly following torture. There were also unconfirmed reports that another of the four men may have died as a result of his treatment in prison.

Such reports increase fears for the fate

of the remaining four refugees if they are returned to Uzbekistan. Amnesty International continues to oppose the forcible return of any asylum-seeker to Uzbekistan, because it believes they have a well-founded fear they will be tortured on their return and may even be sentenced to death. The forcible return of anyone to a country where they risk serious human rights violations such as torture and other ill-treatment would be a flagrant violation of the Kyrgyz government's obligations under international human rights and refugee law and standards.

The authorities have not yet heeded Amnesty International's calls for an independent international enquiry to establish the truth about the events in Andizhan on 12-13 May. On 14 November, in the first trial related to the Andizhan events, Uzbekistan's Supreme

Court sentenced 15 men to jail terms of between 14 and 20 years on charges of "terrorism", "attempts to overthrow the constitutional order", "aggravated murder" and "the seizure of hostages". One of those sentenced was Tavakkal Gadzhiev, who was jailed for 17 years. All 15 defendants had pleaded guilty to the charges, but some human rights groups have expressed concern that they may have been tortured to force them to confess, and have questioned the trial's validity. It looks likely that Uzbekistan will continue to subject people to torture and other ill-treatment, intimidation and harassment, in the name of national security. Until those who witnessed the events in Andizhan, including human rights defender Saidzhakon Zainabitdinov, are allowed to talk freely about what happened, the people of Uzbekistan and the refugees who fled to Kyrgyzstan will continue to live in fear.

To take action on behalf of Saidzhakon Zainabitdinov, go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/uzb-260905-action-eng>

To take action on behalf of the four Uzbekistani refugees in Kyrgyzstan, go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/kyrgyzstan-uzbek-refugees>