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Highlights of document

Central Asia: No excuse for escalating human rights violations

Amnesty International warned the international community of a possible deterioration in the human rights situation in Central Asia, as governments use the 'war against terrorism' as an excuse to further undermine respect for human rights.

Highlights from the report *Central Asia: No excuse for escalating human rights violations* include:

Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, following a clampdown on banned Islamic opposition parties, suspected sympathizers of such parties have been detained. 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 strict regime prison camps throughout Uzbekistan.

On 9 October, the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov said on television: "Indifference to, and tolerance of, those with evil intentions who are spreading various fabrications, handing out leaflets, committing theft and sedition in some neighbourhoods and who are spreading propaganda on behalf of religion should be recognized as being supportive of these evil-doers."

Amnesty International is concerned that statements like this one, together with the Uzbek 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.

Arrests in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

Over the last two years Amnesty International has become increasingly concerned about the growing number of arrests of suspected members of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* and other banned Islamic organizations in two other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Independent observers have expressed fears that Uzbekistan is putting increasing pressure on its neighbours to clamp down on independent Islamic groups which it views as a threat to regional security.

Persecution of Uighurs

Uighurs are Turkic people who are predominantly Muslim. They are the largest indigenous group in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People's Republic of China; a number also live in Central Asia, where many have been established for decades and are nationals of the country they live in, while others -- mainly traders from China -- retain their PRC citizenship.

Uighurs have previously been subjected to human rights violations in the region and have found themselves increasingly accused of sympathizing with and even supporting the banned Islamic opposition movements in Central Asia. Its members have frequently been arbitrarily arrested, tortured and ill-treated by the authorities in Central Asia, and some forcibly deported to China. Amnesty International is concerned that persecution of Uighurs in Central Asia will intensify following the events of 11 September in the US.

Amnesty International is concerned that in the wake of the 11 September attacks in the US, China will step up its pressure on Central Asian republics, especially those countries which are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes Russia and China, as well as Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to seek out, arrest and extradite Uighurs suspected of being "separatists" as part of regional "counter-terrorist" measures.

Afghan civilians and refugees

Security concerns have also influenced the response of Central Asian governments to hundreds of thousands of Afghans fleeing their homes in anticipation of a US-led military strike on Afghanistan. It is feared that the numbers of people fleeing towards Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will dramatically increase following the October 7 start of air strikes on Afghanistan.

Fears that IMU fighters may enter the country along with those Afghans fleeing the conflict have prompted Uzbekistan to seal and reinforce its borders. The Afghan border with Turkmenistan has also been closed. Tajikistan had effectively closed its borders to Afghans fleeing fighting between forces of the opposition Northern Alliance and the Taleban back in September 2000. As a consequence, around 10,000 people have been stranded in particularly harsh conditions on promontories in the Panj river on the Tajik-Afghan border since November 2000.

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