

Uzbekistan: US-backed dictator drowns uprising in blood

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Local hospitals reported that dozens of people were shot to death and scores more wounded by Uzbekistan government forces in the eastern city of Andijan Friday after protesters stormed government offices and a jail, freeing thousands of prisoners.

According to reports from the city, military units opened fire on a demonstration of several thousand men, women and children in the city's central square. The protesters had gathered chanting for "justice" and "freedom" and jobs.

The uprising was sparked by the jailing of 23 local men, many of them prominent business owners, who were accused by the government of Islamic extremism. Underlying the confrontation, however, was longstanding popular anger over mass unemployment, poverty and the brutal methods of the autocratic regime of President Islam Karimov, a key ally of the Bush administration in the so-called global war on terrorism.

The country of 26 million people is the largest of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

The Karimov regime branded the protesters as "bandits," "criminals" and "extremists" and refused any negotiations. The government-owned media broadcast false reports that "rebels" were using women and children as "human shields," even as Uzbek soldiers were gunning down women and children in the streets.

To prevent any independent reporting of the repression, the Uzbek government blocked international television signals from CNN, BBC and Russian networks.

The unrest began Wednesday with peaceful protests outside the courtroom where the 23 men were being placed on trial. But then on Friday morning, a crowd took over a local military camp, stealing dozens of weapons and marching on the prison where the

defendants were held.

The mostly youthful demonstrators participating in the action denied that they had any connection to the country's Islamic fundamentalist movement.

"They say they are not Islamic extremists. They are just ordinary people who are tired of unemployment, who are tired of injustice, and they just want better living conditions," Galima Bukharbaeva, the country director in Uzbekistan for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, told CNN.

The Bush White House issued a hypocritical statement urging "restraint" by both the massacred demonstrators and their government killers.

"The people of Uzbekistan want to see a more representative and democratic government. But that should come through peaceful means not through violence, and that's what our message is," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said. "We have had concerns about human rights in Uzbekistan, but we are concerned about the outbreak of violence, particularly by some members of a terrorist organization that were freed from prison."

Karimov, a former secretary of the Communist Party, has close relations with Washington. He has banned opposition parties for more than a decade, carries out strict press censorship and is holding an estimated 6,000 political prisoners. His regime is infamous for its use of the most brutal means of torture.

The former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray testified that he had seen photographic evidence that interrogations include the use of drowning, suffocation, rape and even boiling the victims to death.

In a confidential memo to the British Foreign Office that was leaked to the *Financial Times* last year, Murray wrote: "Uzbek officials are torturing prisoners

to extract information [about reported terrorist operations], which is supplied to the US and passed through its Central Intelligence Agency to the UK.”

While the US State Department has issued formal reports criticizing the regime for human rights violations, the Bush administration has authorized the CIA and the military to “render” those it has detained in the “war on terrorism” to Uzbekistan, precisely because the regime practices torture.

Karimov’s dictatorship receives hundred of million of dollars annually in aid from the US in return for providing the Pentagon with a key military base at Qarshi Hanabad, where approximately 1,500 US personnel are stationed. The base serves as a major supply facility for the continuing war in neighboring Afghanistan as well as a platform for projecting US military power in the rest of Central Asia.

The Uzbek dictator has been able to draw on Washington’s support, claiming that his brutal methods against his own people are part of the worldwide struggle against terrorism.

There were reports that Karimov flew from the capital of Tashkent to personally direct the repression in Andijan.



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