

Uzbekistan: In for the Long Haul

I. OVERVIEW

Economic misrule and political repression have left Uzbekistan in a woeful state. President Islam Karimov's intransigence has meant that efforts to encourage economic and political reform have failed. Relations with Europe and the U.S. are the worst since independence in 1991. Religious and political repression and worsening living standards have raised domestic tensions and provoked violence. There is little that Western countries can do now to change Uzbekistan's direction but they should be doing more to prepare the Uzbek people and the neighbouring states to withstand future instability in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan is well down the path of self-destruction followed by such countries as Burma, Zimbabwe and North Korea, in which an elite prospers while the majority lives in worsening poverty. Even as European governments and the U.S. have encouraged regional development, Tashkent acts as a persistent spoiler and presents a growing threat to its neighbours, with refugees and drugs spilling over its frontiers. The other four Central Asian states and Afghanistan are all relatively weak and vulnerable. Kyrgyzstan was profoundly shaken by the arrival of fewer than 500 refugees after the Andijon massacre in May 2005. Tajikistan has been hard hit by border closures and trade restrictions. Even relatively prosperous Kazakhstan could be seriously troubled if violence were to drive Uzbeks across its border.

Uzbekistan represents no direct security threat to Europe or the U.S., and the government in Tashkent is not at risk of imminent collapse. But Uzbekistan could well become the centre of instability in Central Asia in the medium to long term, and this would have a significant impact on Western interests. It could, for example, prompt an aggressive Russian intervention in the region and stimulate the undercurrents of Islamic extremism that so far have been more of an irritant than a major threat. It would almost certainly create an environment in which trafficking in drugs and people would worsen and hamper the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

Western policies meant to support development of political and economic openness in Tashkent have failed, and the emphasis now should be changed. Although efforts should certainly be made to continue to apply pressure through

targeted sanctions, voluntary trade restrictions and OSCE investigative mechanisms, the EU, the U.S. and other donor governments like Japan need to acknowledge that they have almost no influence with the Karimov government and few levers with which to change this in the short term.

The emphasis rather should be on longer term measures, amounting essentially to a lifeboat strategy to maintain political activity, civil society and educational opportunities in the expectation of future change to a more reasonable government, and an effort to reduce the impact likely future instability in Uzbekistan would have on its neighbours. In particular, the key external players should consider the following steps:

- ❑ stepping up support for Uzbeks to study abroad, journalism training in the region and broadcasting in Uzbekistan, including educational programs and news;
- ❑ expanding the capacity of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to cope with the economic and political fallout from problems in Uzbekistan, including help in crisis planning, pre-positioning of resources to handle refugee flows, improving policing and border security and increasing aid to ministries responsible for emergency situations;
- ❑ helping Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan become less dependent on Uzbekistan for energy and transport, for example by providing assistance for hydropower projects, particularly small scale schemes, and improving roads from Almaty, Bishkek and Dushanbe to China, Russia and Afghanistan;
- ❑ expanding assistance in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan for institutions, focusing on policing, governance, the judicial sector, and parliaments; and
- ❑ considering a longer-term plan to build trade connections among Afghanistan, Pakistan and the three Central Asian nations, without waiting for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to sign up.

II. THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The Karimov regime's increasingly repressive policies since the late 1990s have deepened popular dissatisfaction and contributed to social unrest.¹ A major turning point came in May 2005, in the eastern city of Andijon.² On 12-13 May the trial of 23 local businessmen accused of membership in an alleged Islamic extremist group known as "Akramiya" came to a bloody end when an armed group stormed the prison where they had been held. After freeing the businessmen and hundreds of other inmates, the attackers occupied buildings in the centre of town. Security forces then moved in to suppress the uprising, using indiscriminate force. Eyewitness accounts tell of security forces firing at armed and unarmed individuals alike. The exact number of deaths is not known; official accounts put it at 187,³ while other reports based on eye-witness testimony speak of hundreds, mostly unarmed civilians.⁴

¹ For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°38, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, 25 May 2005; Crisis Group Asia Report N°76, *The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community*, 11 March 2004; Crisis Group Asia Report N°46, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program: Illusion or Reality*, 18 February 2003; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°21, *Central Asia: Uzbekistan at Ten – Repression And Instability*, 21 August 2001.

² The international media use various spellings for this city: "Andijon", "Andizhan", "Andijan", and so on. As the spelling "Andijon" most accurately reflects the name of the city in Uzbek, it is the version Crisis Group uses.

³ Uzbek authorities have yet to publish an official list of casualties. Recently, the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, relying on information from the first Andijon trial, published the names of 185 victims. See Memorial's 6 January 2006 press release on its website, www.memo.ru.

⁴ For example, a report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) called the government's use of force in Andijon "indiscriminate and disproportionate" and estimated that 300 to 500 people had been killed. "Preliminary Findings on the Events in Andijon, 13 May 2005", ODIHR, 20 June 2005, available at http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2005/06/15233_en.pdf. Likewise, a report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concluded that "grave human rights violations mostly of the right to life were committed by Uzbek military and security forces". See "Report of the Mission to Kyrgyzstan by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concerning the killings in Andijan, Uzbekistan of 13-14 May 2005", 12 July 2005. Both reports were based on interviews in Kyrgyzstan with survivors of the Andijon violence, and both called for an independent international investigation into the events in order to obtain a fuller picture. Similar conclusions were reached by Human Rights Watch (HRW), "'Bullets were falling like rain': The Andijon Massacre, 13-14 May, 2005", HRW, June 2005, available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/uzbekistan0605/>. The HRW reports included information from interviews in Andijon itself.

The government says it responded appropriately to a terrorist attack that was planned and financed from abroad and puts the blame for the casualties squarely on the attackers. However, it has offered no evidence of foreign involvement or that the incident was orchestrated by Islamist extremists. Russia and China, whose economic and political cooperation with Uzbekistan has grown as Western relations have cooled, were quick to endorse Karimov's version of events. Western governments' calls for an independent investigation have been repeatedly rebuffed by Tashkent.

A. THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

More than anything it has been the ruinous economic policies of the Karimov regime which have increased popular dissatisfaction and led to unrest.⁵ A recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission reported that economic performance was generally very good in 2004, as reflected in GDP growth of roughly 7.5 per cent.⁶ There is reason for scepticism, however. Much of Uzbekistan's GDP growth comes from favourable prices for certain key exports, especially cotton, gold, and, increasingly, gas, but the revenues from these commodities are distributed among a very small circle of the ruling elite, with little or no benefit for the populace at large.

What the regime describes as reforms have often been measures to concentrate resources in yet fewer hands, giving immense power to the regime but closing off avenues of advancement for most people. Particularly damaging have been efforts to control or close the bazaars, on which the livelihood of millions depend. Revenues from cotton, a sector which could provide great stimulus for rural development, do not reach those people – mostly women and children – who grow and harvest it in conditions of virtual slavery.⁷ Lack of economic opportunities at home means more and more Uzbeks are seeking employment abroad as migrant workers in Russia or Kazakhstan, where they have little or no legal protection.

Frustrations over economic policies led to increasing unrest in 2004 and 2005.⁸ While the suppression of the

⁵ Crisis Group has been tracking economic, social and political developments in Uzbekistan since 2000. See the reports listed in fn. 1 above for more details.

⁶ See IMF Press Release no. 05/60, 15 March 2005.

⁷ This is especially disturbing as the IMF mission also reported that Uzbekistan, the world's sixth largest producer and second largest exporter, had its best cotton-producing year since 1991. For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°93, *The Curse of Cotton: Central Asia's Destructive Monoculture*, 28 February 2005.

⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, op. cit.

Andijon uprising may have had a temporary chilling effect on this unrest, the potential for its resurgence remains. An example is the demonstration that followed the announcement in August 2005 that a large bazaar in the city of Samarkand would be closed.⁹ Though this protest was entirely peaceful, it indicates that fear will not hold popular dissent in check indefinitely.

The authorities have denied that economic factors played a role in the Andijon events. Yet, they have taken some token steps towards liberalisation. In June 2005, Karimov signed legislation intended to guarantee the rights of entrepreneurs and protect them from excessive official meddling, including unwarranted tax inspections.¹⁰ On 14 December, he issued a decree raising the minimum wage to 9,400 soms (roughly \$9) per month, and the minimum pension to 18,605 soms (\$18) per month.¹¹ Authorities have reportedly been particularly generous in Andijon itself, where they have been markedly conscientious about delivering pensions on time. Local banks are also reportedly offering Andijon residents credit on favourable terms.¹²

Other signs are less encouraging. In September 2005, Karimov signed legislation imposing punishing tariffs on a wide range of imported goods, from food products to manufactures.¹³ Apparently intended to fill state coffers and stimulate local production, the measure seems unlikely to do either. Rather, it continues the heavy-handed state intrusions that have pushed so many people to the edge of survival.

B. THE POLITICAL SITUATION

Even before the Andijon events, rumours were rife about a power struggle brewing in Tashkent. Karimov's reportedly poor health has been the subject of much speculation and raises the question of succession. The

president's daughter, Gulnora Karimova, who wields tremendous influence in business circles (see below), is often mentioned in this context, though she may not be acceptable to other members of the political and economic elite.¹⁴ Alisher Usmonov, a gas and steel magnate who lives in Moscow, and Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, previously governor of Jizzakh and Samarkand provinces, are also mentioned as potential successors.¹⁵

Persistent rumours of growing dissatisfaction with Karimov's policies among mid-level officials, including within the security services, have sparked speculation about a possible "palace coup". Indeed, dissent within the security services, on whom Karimov now relies more than ever, could be dangerous, yet at the moment his control seems assured. Among those said to be closest to him prior to the Andijon uprising were Interior Minister Zokirjon Almatov and the chief of the National Security Service (NSS¹⁶), Rustam Inoyatov. There have been rumours of intense inter-service rivalry, and shortly after the Andijon events the ministry of internal affairs (MIA) was stripped of its internal forces, which were reportedly divided between the NSS and the ministry of defence.¹⁷ Almatov became less and less visible as rumours of his ill health grew; these were confirmed when he sought treatment in a German hospital for cancer. He has since resigned, succeeded by his protégé, former customs agency chief Bahodir Matlubov, a figure who seems to hold little promise for progressive change.¹⁸ Inoyatov remains in place.

⁹ Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Samarkand hit by country's first Andijon protests", RFE/RL, 22 August 2005, at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/3824712a-c504-46ca-a677-e62b8ec5f4bd.html>.

¹⁰ Order of the President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov N°UP-3619, 14 June 2005. Other measures outlined in the decree include simplification of licensing and registration procedures and possible criminal offences for officials who exceed their authority.

¹¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 15 September 2005. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

¹² According to one local observer, such "populist" methods have not gone unnoticed in other regions and may have unintended consequences. "People look at this and say, 'In Andijon they rose up, and now they're being treated fairly'". Crisis Group interview, January 2006.

¹³ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov N°PP-183, 19 September 2005.

¹⁴ Karimova has reportedly been instrumental in strengthening Uzbekistan's business ties with Russia, a fact which is said to have angered members of Uzbekistan's business elite who had spent years cultivating close relations with the West. Many also see her as exercising undue influence over business dealings within the country as well. Crisis Group interviews, Tashkent, April 2005.

¹⁵ Mirziyoyev would also be an unpopular choice, though for other reasons; he has a reputation for violent and unpredictable behaviour and has been accused of physically assaulting cotton farmers under his supervision who failed to meet their production quotas. See Crisis Group Report, *The Curse of Cotton*, op. cit.

¹⁶ The NSS (also known by its Russian initials, SNB) is the successor to the Soviet KGB.

¹⁷ "Politics: Events in Andizhan effect changes in security structures", *Fergana.ru*, 6 June 2005, at <http://enews.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=971>.

¹⁸ It was first reported that Almatov's successor was Anvar Solihboyev, a former deputy head of the NSS and an Inoyatov protégé. Local observers claim that Solihboyev was indeed appointed, only to be removed a day later, when MIA officials objected. Crisis Group interviews, January and February 2006.

C. AFTER ANDIJON

1. Internal repression

Uzbekistan's record on human rights and political liberties has been dismal in the past decade and has grown worse following Andijon. Political opponents of the regime have come under renewed pressure, and human rights activists have faced increased harassment, including intimidation and violence. Many have been arrested.¹⁹

The political opposition has been weak and fragmented. In April 2005, however, an attempt was made to unite it into the so-called "Sunshine Coalition".²⁰ Headed by Sanjar Umarov, a millionaire businessman with strong Western connections, and Nigora Hidoyatova, acting head of the Free Farmers' Party (Ozod dehqonlar partiyasi), the coalition called for faster economic and political reforms. After Andijon, coalition members at first seemed untouched, which raised speculation about possible support within the government.²¹ In October, however, arrests began, including of Umarov.²² His lawyers have claimed that their client, who suffers from high blood pressure and heart trouble, has been denied adequate medical attention.²³ There have also been reports that he

is being kept in a drugged state.²⁴ The husband of Nigora Hidoyatova, a businessman, was shot in the head in Kazakhstan in late November and died on 8 December.²⁵ And on 19 December 2005, Nigora's sister, Nodira Hidoyatova, was arrested at Tashkent airport upon returning from Moscow, where she had publicly criticised the Karimov regime. She faces a number of charges, including tax fraud.²⁶

Shortly after Andijon, Hamdam Sulaymonov, deputy head of the unregistered opposition movement Birlik ("Unity") was arrested, but he was released six months later on "humanitarian grounds".²⁷ Dadakhon Hasanov, a well-known singer and one of the founders of Birlik, has also reportedly been placed under house arrest. The NSS is said to be interrogating Hasanov in connection with an audio cassette containing songs critical of the Karimov regime, interspersed with eyewitness commentary on the Andijon events.²⁸

¹⁹ Arrested activists include: Saidjahon Zaynabiddinov, an Andijon lawyer arrested just over a week after the events and sentenced in January 2006 to seven years imprisonment for "spreading false information"; Dilmurod Muhiddinov and Musojon Bobojonov, heads of the local branch of the human rights organisation Ezgulik ("Benevolence") in the town of Marhamat in Andijon province, in late May 2005; Elena Urlaeva, a member of the Free Farmers Party, arrested and sentenced to forced medical treatment in a psychiatric hospital in September 2005 and released in late October; Mu'tabar Tojiboyeva, head of the Ut yuraklar ("Ardent Hearts") club in the city of Ferghana, arrested after being repeatedly detained and threatened on 7 October 2005 while planning to travel to an international human rights conference in Dublin.

²⁰ The coalition's full name is "My Sunny Uzbekistan" (Serquyosh Uzbekistonim). According to its leaders, its main objectives were to further economic reform in the country and foster the emergence of a middle class. Crisis Group interview, members of Sunshine Coalition, Tashkent, April 2005.

²¹ Members of the coalition themselves expressed confidence that their views were supported by mid-level officials at the very least, and by some within the security services as well. Crisis Group interviews, Tashkent, April 2005.

²² See "Lider 'Solnechnoi koalitsii' Uzbekistana Sandzhar Umarov arestovan" [The leader of Uzbekistan's Sunshine Coalition Sanjar Umarov is arrested], Fergana.ru, 23 October 2005.

²³ "Sanjar Umarov advokatlari bilan uchrashdi" [Sanjar Umarov has met his lawyers], Uzbek service of RFE/RL, 26 November 2005, <http://www.ozodlik.org/domesticreports/policy/uz/2005/11/BFA1C31A-A533-40D9-A427-3E7300218002.asp>.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, November 2005.

²⁵ "Posle ranenii v golovu v Kazakhstane skonchalsia muzh Nigory Khidoiatovoi" [After head wounds, Nigora Hidoyatova's husband has died in Kazakhstan], Fergana.ru, 12 December 2005.

²⁶ "Polnyi tekst zaiavleniia Genprokuratury Uzbekistana po delu N. Khidoiatovoi" [The complete text of the declaration of the Prosecutor General of Uzbekistan on the case of Nodira Hidoyatova], Fergana.ru, 20 December 2005.

²⁷ Sulaymonov says he offered to act as negotiator between the rebels and the government during the Andijon events but that the authorities turned him down. See "Hamdam Sulaymonov ozodlikka chiqdi" [Hamdam Sulaymonov has been freed], Uzbek service of RFE/RL, 8 December 2005.

²⁸ The tape contains one song, a copy of which is in Crisis Group's possession, which is particularly inflammatory. Entitled "There was a massacre in Andijon" (Andijonda qatli om buldi), it contains verses such as: "From the orders of the president/ From the bullets of Kalashnikovs/The bullets of [his] blind followers hit the people/There was a massacre in Andijon"; "Children died in the streets/Like bright red tulips/Mothers screamed and pleaded./There was a massacre in Andijon"; "We have seen who the terrorist is/And we are filled with rage and fury"; and "The Uzbeks continue to sleep/They continue to sink into fear/And the dictators continue to shoot/There was a massacre in Andijon". The song was originally broadcast by the Uzbek service of RFE/RL. Possession of this cassette, which has been widely copied and distributed, can have dangerous consequences. Two people are known to have been arrested for this by the NSS in early November 2005 in Bukhara's Ghijduvon region: schoolteacher Jamol Qutliyev and 70-year-old Hazrat Bobo. They face charges of distributing subversive literature. Nasrullo Saidov, head of the regional branch of the opposition movement Erk ("Will"), was accused by the NSS of distributing the cassette; after being interrogated for hours, he fled to Kazakhstan before making his way to Kyrgyzstan. Crisis Group interview, Nasrullo Saidov, Bishkek, January 2006.

2. The evisceration of civil society

According to the Open Society Foundation (OSF), “the independent local NGO sector in Uzbekistan is on the verge of being wiped out”.²⁹ Local NGOs had come under increased pressure following Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” in 2003, with authorities imposing tough new restrictions on registration and funding. After Andijon, pressure increased, particularly in the Ferghana Valley. The OSF estimates that “more than 60 per cent of all active NGOs [have] been closed down during 2005 alone”. Even apolitical NGOs – associations of librarians and beekeepers – have been shut down. Of 273 NGOs registered in the province of Ferghana, over 100 closed between July and January 2005.³⁰ As one commentator quipped, “soon the only functioning NGO in Uzbekistan will be Hizb ut-Tahrir”.³¹

3. The silencing of the media

Shortly after Andijon, the Uzbek government accused the foreign media of prior knowledge of the events, which it claimed journalists had organised and financed. Particular pressure fell on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). BBC Central Asia correspondent Monica Whitlock left Uzbekistan after the ministry of foreign affairs accused the local BBC office of supporting terrorism although, as always, none of these accusations were backed up with any evidence.³² IWPR country director Galima Bukharbaeva, who was in Andijon as the massacre unfolded and has written and spoken extensively about what she saw, was labelled a terrorist and has left the country.³³ Matluba

Azamatova, who worked as a correspondent for both IWPR and the BBC and had extensively covered the trial of the 23 businessmen which preceded the violence, returned to Uzbekistan after briefly seeking refuge in Kyrgyzstan, only to learn that she was slated for arrest; she fled again and has been granted political asylum in Europe.³⁴ On 26 August 2005, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), RFE/RL correspondent Nosir Zokirov “was summoned to court, charged with insulting a security officer, tried without counsel or witnesses, sentenced [to six months], and imprisoned” in the course of a single day.³⁵ Freelance journalists working for internet news agencies have likewise been threatened and attacked.³⁶ According to the CPJ, Uzbekistan now ranks fifth in the world in the number of journalists imprisoned.³⁷

In October 2005, after persistent harassment and the flight from Uzbekistan of seven staff members (two of whom subsequently received refugee status from the UN), the BBC closed its office in Tashkent.³⁸ And in mid-December, the government refused to grant a license to the Uzbek service of RFE/RL.³⁹ In the meantime, local media has if anything become even more subservient, lashing out at the alleged foreign sponsors of the Andijon uprising – the U.S. in particular.⁴⁰

²⁹ See the OSF’s “Eurasian Civil Society Monitor”, October 2005.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, January 2006.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, April 2005. Hizb ut-Tahrir is a clandestine Islamist movement seeking to unite all Muslims under a worldwide caliphate. Its supporters in Uzbekistan are routinely persecuted, yet the state’s continuing efforts to stifle all dissent and restrict the number of legitimate venues for discussion and debate help create the very conditions under which Hizb ut-Tahrir can flourish. For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003.

³² Crisis Group interview, London, August 2005.

³³ See Bukharbaeva’s article “Witness to a Massacre: An Uzbek reporter risked her life to tell the world of Andijan assault”, *Dangerous Assignments*, fall/winter 2005, at http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2005/DA_fall05/galima/galima_DA_fall05.html, and her opinion piece, “Uzbekistan: Where journalism is branded terrorism”, *International Herald Tribune*, 21 September 2005. Bukharbaeva received an International Press Freedom award from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in November 2005.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Matluba Azamatova, Bishkek, October 2005.

³⁵ See the CPJ’s press briefing of 22 September 2005.

³⁶ Igor Rotar, a correspondent for a number of online news services, was detained upon arrival in Tashkent in August 2005, held for two days, and subsequently deported. “Uzbekistan: Russian human rights journalist deported”, IRIN, 15 August 2005. Fergana.ru correspondent Aleksei Volosevich, who reported from Andijon on 13 May, was beaten by unknown attackers in November. Fergana.ru, 9 November 2005.

³⁷ With six journalists in prison as of 1 December 2005, Uzbekistan stands behind China, Cuba, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, and just ahead of Burma and the U.S. See the CPJ’s special report at http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2005/imprisoned_05/imprisoned_05.html.

³⁸ See the BBC’s 26 October 2005 press release, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10/october/26/tashkent.shtml>.

³⁹ Gulnoza Saidazimova, “Uzbekistan: RFE/RL forced to close Tashkent bureau after government decries accreditation”, RFE/RL, 13 December 2005, at <http://www.rferl.org/feature/article/2005/12/91956278-7ab3-4e13-883e-2d279827a8e6.html>.

⁴⁰ See Shawn Lyons, “After Andijan: An Uzbek newspaper’s betrayal”, EurasiaNet, 19 August 2005. There is, however, the occasional exception. In November 2005, the newspaper of the Uzbekistan Lawyers’ Association, published an article by Dilmurod Sayyid which lamented deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the country. “Yuq’ haqida badiha” [A sketch about “No”], *Advokat-press*, 24-30 November 2005. The journal’s publication has since been halted by Tashkent authorities, and Sayyid was reportedly called in for “serious conversations”. See

4. The Andijon trials

Beginning in September 2005, a group of fifteen men, including three citizens of Kyrgyzstan, went on trial for involvement in the Andijon events. Though the authorities announced that the trial would be “open” and allowed foreign journalists and representatives of embassies and international organisations to attend, it was a carefully stage-managed affair in the worst traditions of Stalinist days. On the first day, all fifteen accused pleaded guilty.⁴¹ The trial itself offered few surprises and seemed calculated to shore up the government’s case that the events were planned with foreign backing. Yet in this, Uzbek officials may have miscalculated; the fact that the trial began in such a patently scripted way undermined the credibility of whatever testimony followed. “There may well have been some useful information in the testimony given”, an OSCE official said. “But the trial was conducted in such a way that it’s just impossible to separate fact from fiction”.⁴² There was one notable departure from the script: Mahbuba Zokirova, a 33-year-old woman from Andijon, testified that government forces opened fire on unarmed people without warning, both at the demonstration in the city and later as fugitives (Zokirova among them) attempted to cross the Kyrgyz border.⁴³

The first Andijon trial ended in mid-November with convictions and lengthy prison sentences for all the accused. It has been followed by other trials in cities around the country, yet as these have all been conducted behind closed doors, it is impossible to say precisely how many people were involved and what charges they faced. Over 150 are thought to have been convicted in connection with the Andijon events, including officials, prison staff, and soldiers, who face charges ranging from dereliction

“Advokat-press yopildi. Dilmurod Sayyid esa gapidan qaytmoqchi emas” [*Advokat-press* has been closed. But Dilmurod Sayyid does not plan to retract his statement], Uzbek service of RFE/RL, 1 December 2005, at <http://www.ozodlik.org/domesticreports/society/uz/2005/12/DCA326BE-BD0B-4B02-A534-4C60423CC711.asp>.

⁴¹ See *RFE/RL Newswire*, 21 September 2005. HRW and Amnesty each issued reports to coincide with the beginning of the trial that described how Uzbek authorities had sought to conceal evidence of the massacre and coerce survivors into giving testimony in support of the official version. “Burying the truth: Uzbekistan rewrites the story of the Andijon massacre”, HRW, and “Uzbekistan: Lifting the siege on the truth about Andizhan”, Amnesty International.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, November 2005.

⁴³ The entire Uzbek-language transcript of Zokirova’s testimony can be found on the website of RFE/RL’s Uzbek service, <http://www.ozodlik.org/domesticreports/policy/uz/2005/10/3D9DC52F-D264-4447-A4CB-DC7E3747EF8B.asp>. An excerpted English version is available at <http://www.rferl.org/reports/centralasia/2005/10/41-271005.asp>.

of duty to aiding and abetting the takeover of the prison where the 23 accused businessmen were being held.⁴⁴

5. The hunt abroad

The crackdown has not been limited to Uzbekistan; arrests and threats of arrest of alleged terrorists have followed in other countries. The flight of Uzbek refugees to Kyrgyzstan after the massacre led to that country’s first international crisis as the Bakiyev government came under pressure from Tashkent to send them back; four are known to have been handed over to Uzbek security services, and others left the camp in unclear circumstances.⁴⁵ Some have criticised the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for failing to provide adequate protection.⁴⁶ UN representatives, for their part, maintain that they responded as best they could to an unexpected emergency.⁴⁷ Most of the largest group of refugees – nearly 500 – were relocated to Europe; four, however, remain in the custody of Kyrgyz law enforcement officials,⁴⁸ and there is some concern they may be returned to Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ There have been reports of hundreds of other fugitives in southern Kyrgyzstan, afraid to approach either Kyrgyz authorities or international organisations for fear of being handed back to Uzbekistan, yet it is impossible to say to what extent these reports are accurate. There have likewise been rumours of Uzbek security agents operating openly in southern Kyrgyzstan, offering cash rewards in return for fugitives.⁵⁰

There have been disturbing developments in neighbouring Kazakhstan as well. In July 2005, Lutfullo Shamsuddinov, a human rights activist from Andijon, was granted refugee status by the UNHCR office in Almaty, only to be arrested by Kazakh police in response to a request from Uzbekistan.⁵¹ Shamsuddinov was released to the UNHCR after an international outcry.⁵² Others have not been so fortunate. According to the Moscow-based human rights association Memorial, between 23 and 27 November 2005

⁴⁴ See *RFE/RL Newswire*, 27 December 2005.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek and Osh, September 2005–January 2006, and Crisis Group Asia Report N°109, *Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State*, 16 December 2005.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, November 2005, and Osh, January 2006.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2006.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group report, *Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ In late December 2005, a Bishkek city court ruled that the four men could be sent back to Uzbekistan; their subsequent appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected. Uzbekistan accuses three of the four of involvement in the murder of Andijon Prosecutor-General Ghanijon Abdurahimov during the uprising.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek and Osh, December 2005 and January 2006.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Almaty, July 2005.

⁵² See HRW press release, 14 July 2005.

ten Uzbek citizens – including some who had sought UNHCR protection – vanished from the southern city of Shymkent. Memorial has accused the Kazakh security services of handing the men over to Uzbekistan.⁵³

The crackdown has reached Russia, where in June 2005 fourteen ethnic Uzbeks (twelve citizens of Uzbekistan, one of Kyrgyzstan and one who claimed Russian citizenship) were held in Ivanovo, accused of belonging to Akramiya and of aiding the Andijon uprising. They face extradition to Uzbekistan.⁵⁴

III. THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

A. THE UNITED STATES

Washington's relations with Tashkent have hit a new low. Infuriated by the role of the U.S. in evacuating the Andijon refugees from Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek government demanded that it withdraw from the Qarshi-Khonobod ("K2") airbase and barred U.S. overflights. The last aircraft left the base, which the U.S. had used since 2001, in mid-November 2005.⁵⁵ Karimov has accused the U.S. of instigating the Andijon uprising although no evidence has ever been offered. U.S.-funded NGOs have come under intense pressure and in some cases have been forced to shut down.⁵⁶

⁵³ Memorial reports that most of the men had previously been sought by the Uzbek authorities for membership in banned religious organisations or seeking to undermine the constitutional order – common charges leveled by the Karimov regime against potential troublemakers. One was allegedly a member of the Akramiya movement. See the 5 December 2005 statement by Memorial at the organisation's website, www.memo.ru. Four of the men had applied to the UNHCR for refugee status; their cases were still pending at the time of their disappearance. Crisis Group interview, Almaty, February 2006.

⁵⁴ Kim Murphy, "Uzbekistan pursues suspects on Russian soil", *The Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 2005. Thirteen of the men, including one citizen of Kyrgyzstan, later appealed to the Russian government for refugee status; their claim was rejected on 17 January 2006. Lawyers have filed an appeal on their behalf, and hearings are due to be held in mid-February 2006. One man, Khotam Hojimatov, fled to Ukraine and applied to the UNHCR after a Russian court ruled he did not have Russian citizenship and was therefore subject to extradition (Russian law does not allow its citizens to be extradited). See the 14 November 2005, 18 January 2006 and 31 January 2006 press releases of the Memorial human rights association at www.memo.ru.

⁵⁵ In October 2005, a group of U.S. lawmakers backed a bill that would have withheld payment of \$22.9 million for use of the base; the bill did not pass. See *RFE/RF Newslines*, 18 November 2005.

⁵⁶ For example, in September 2005, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), an organisation which promotes

Washington has made token gestures of displeasure with the Uzbek government; for example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did not visit during a tour of the region in October 2005. It also ended military assistance after the Congress set human rights conditions that the administration concluded Uzbekistan did not meet. Most assistance in the proposed Fiscal Year 2007 budget, except for customs and drugs-related border help, is aimed at strengthening civil society. Nonetheless, the U.S, unlike the EU, has yet to impose any targeted sanctions such as visa restrictions on senior officials or assets freezes. U.S. diplomats still may be seeking to salvage the last vestiges of cooperation in the war on terror, although they privately discount the likelihood of any renewed engagement with the Karimov regime.

B. THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU was quick to express outrage about the Andijon violence but its threatened punishment came only after the verdicts in the first trial. Among the measures it imposed was a ban on the sale of arms to Uzbekistan. More directly, twelve Uzbek officials deemed most directly responsible for the massacre were banned from receiving visas for one year.⁵⁷

No sooner had the list been announced, however, when reports began to circulate that the person literally and figuratively at the top of the EU list – Interior Minister Almatov – was in Germany (Hannover), receiving treatment for terminal cancer. German and European officials pressed for comment cited humanitarian concerns for waiving the visa ban.⁵⁸ "This is not just a 'diplomatic illness' – this really is cancer", one official said.⁵⁹

On 12 December 2005, with the backing of Human Rights Watch, survivors of the massacre and victims of other human rights violations urged the German government to

academic exchanges, had its activities suspended for six months. In October 2005, the U.S.-funded NGO Internews, a broadcast media development organisation, was forced to shut down permanently. See "Uzbekistan: Media development NGO folds", IRIN, 13 October 2005. In January 2006, the human rights organisation Freedom House was ordered to suspend its activities for six months. See its 13 January 2006 press release at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=322>.

⁵⁷ These included Interior Minister Zokirjon Almatov, Defense Minister Qodir Ghulomov, NSS head Rustam Inoyatov, Presidential adviser Ruslan Mirzoyev, Andijon governor Saydullo Begaliyev and General Vladimir Mamo, commander of the interior ministry's rapid reaction brigade. See the 14 November 2005 press release of the Council of the European Union.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Brussels, November 2005.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, November 2005.

arrest Almatov for crimes against humanity.⁶⁰ Their call was echoed by Manfred Nowak, the UN special rapporteur on torture.⁶¹ But before any action was taken, Almatov left Germany, reappearing in Tashkent where his retirement on health grounds was announced.⁶²

German and EU officials alike have strongly denied that Almatov's treatment had anything to do with the airbase in the southern city of Termez that Germany uses to supply its forces in Afghanistan.⁶³ Though the Uzbek government apparently decided to allow Germany to continue to use that base, despite a ban on most NATO flights over Uzbek airspace,⁶⁴ there were reports in late January 2006 that the ministry of foreign affairs was threatening to close it, accusing Germany of allowing U.S., Danish, and Hungarian troops to pass through en route to Afghanistan. The government has likewise demanded that Germany invest some €20 million in local development. (Berlin has already put €12 million into renovating and modernising the airfield, and pays a monthly rent of €240,000.)⁶⁵

At any rate, the "Almatov affair" has damaged EU credibility, and officials seem uncertain about how to proceed. Those interviewed in Brussels and elsewhere were inclined, like their counterparts in Washington, to seek "dialogue" and "engagement" over punitive actions. "Our objective is to make the Uzbeks see that we disapprove, but not to cut dialog with them", a diplomat in Central Asia said.⁶⁶ These are certainly worthwhile goals, yet thus far the Uzbek government has given few signs of interest in dialogue.⁶⁷ On the contrary, relations with some EU members have become particularly tense. In November 2005, citing the need for road repairs, workers in Tashkent removed the concrete barriers from the front of the British embassy, forcing it to close down

all offices in the front part of the building and curtail consular services.⁶⁸ The move seemed a calculated one by the Uzbek government, and offers scant hope for dialogue.

C. RUSSIA

In the first years of independence, Karimov distanced himself from Moscow, refusing to participate in Russian-backed regional organisations and seeking closer economic ties with the West. Relations with the West cooled as Europe and the U.S. criticised his government's human rights record. The Uzbek president drifted back towards Russia – a move that became a close embrace in the second half of 2005. Following the Andijon events, Russia fully endorsed the Uzbek government's version and applauded Karimov's methods in combating "terrorism". Seizing advantage of the breakdown of relations between Tashkent and Washington, Russia welcomed Uzbekistan back into the fold. In November 2005, the two countries signed a pact of allegiance, creating a framework for each to come to the aid of the other in response to perceived threats to the peace or acts of aggression.⁶⁹

There has been a noticeable economic reorientation towards Moscow as well. Gulnora Karimova, the president's daughter, is said to wield tremendous influence in Russian-Uzbek business relations. She has close ties with the Kremlin-controlled energy giant Gazprom.⁷⁰ Its CEO, Aleksei Miller, is reported to be trying to negotiate a deal with Uzbekistan's Uzneftegaz company that would give Gazprom a virtual monopoly over Uzbek gas exports.⁷¹

It is clear that Karimov hopes the promise of Russian support – including military help – will enable him to

⁶⁰ "Germany: Uzbek security chief accused of crimes against humanity", HRW, 15 December 2005.

⁶¹ See the 16 December 2005 press release of the Special Rapporteur, available online at <http://www.unhcr.ch/>.

⁶² "Controversial Uzbek interior minister resigns", RFE/RL, 22 December 2005, at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/12/4BDD6821-CBD1-4ED0-B714-CA0E3C431AED.html>.

⁶³ See *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 December 2005.

⁶⁴ Agence France-Presse, 11 November 2005.

⁶⁵ "Uzbekistan objavi o vozmozhnom prekrashchenii dogovora arendy bazy FRG v Termeze" [Uzbekistan has announced the possible cessation of the rental agreement for the FRG's base in Termez], *fergana.ru*, 1 February 2006, <http://news.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=2217&mode=news>.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, November 2005.

⁶⁷ Western diplomats tell Crisis Group that they have had virtually no meetings with the foreign ministry since the Andijon events. "Every time we meet our colleagues from other embassies, we ask each other, 'have you seen anyone? Did you get any meetings?' No one is getting any official access", one said. Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, London, November 2005.

⁶⁹ Article 3 of the treaty reads: "In the event of the emergence of a situation which, in the view of either party, can pose a threat to peace, disturb the peace, or affect its security interests, or the emergence of the threat of an act of aggression being carried out against either side, the parties shall immediately activate the mechanism of appropriate consultations for the coordination of their positions and the coordination of practical methods to regulate such a situation". The treaty also obligates both sides to regard an act of external aggression against one as an act of aggression against both and to provide "necessary assistance, including military". The full text of the treaty is available at www.kremlin.ru.

⁷⁰ Gazprom's business dealings with former Soviet republics are handled by Alisher Usmonov, a native of Namangan (Uzbekistan) who is one of Russia's leading business oligarchs.

⁷¹ Mikhail Zygar and Dmitrii Butrin, "Goriuchii storonnik I. Karimova. 'Gazprom' obespechit stabil'nost' rezhima v Uzbekistane" [I. Karimov's fiery supporter. "Gazprom" will provide stability for the regime in Uzbekistan], *Kommersant*, 19 January 2006.

weather whatever political instability he may face. At the same time, however, Karimov, after having spent so many years steering his country away from Russian domination, can hardly be entirely comfortable to be back in Russia's embrace. The Kremlin's willingness to link itself so closely to Karimov is also puzzling; access to Uzbekistan's gas reserves is an obvious boon, yet Karimov has hardly proven himself a reliable ally in the past, and it is uncertain to what extent Russians at large would back a military intervention to support him.

Russia's newfound influence in Tashkent has led some to speculate that Moscow may itself be able to bring about regime change by persuading Karimov to step aside; in late 2005, there were persistent rumours that the Kremlin was grooming Alisher Usmonov for just such a change.⁷² Though this has failed to materialise, many in Uzbekistan apparently hope that Russia will be able to arrange a "soft landing" for both Karimov and the country in the event that the Uzbek president should choose to step down. It is difficult to see, however, what could induce Karimov to consent to this. Moreover, an increasingly authoritarian government in Moscow is likely to prop up the regime while extracting the maximum benefit in preferential trade deals and doing little or nothing to address the underlying sources of discontent with Karimov's rule.⁷³ This policy would only worsen the risks of conflict in the long run.

D. CHINA

Beijing's search for new markets for its consumer goods and new energy sources has led it to become an increasingly influential player in Central Asia. A number of Chinese companies have recently signed multi-million-dollar oil exploration deals with their Uzbek counterparts.⁷⁴ China's political influence in the region is growing, most visibly manifested in the reinvigorated Shanghai

Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁷⁵ China gave unqualified support to the Karimov regime after the Andijon massacre and can hardly be expected to add its voice to calls for a full accounting. Nonetheless, it has an interest in not seeing its investments squandered and may have a role to play in prodding Karimov towards some degree of economic liberalisation.⁷⁶

IV. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT: THE NEIGHBOURS

Further instability or outright collapse in Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous country, would have serious consequences for the region as a whole. Many neighbours (particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) are weak states whose infrastructures are, to varying degrees, closely linked with that of Uzbekistan. Additionally, the potential arrival on their territories of refugees fleeing unrest could pose major political and humanitarian challenges, as shown by the crisis provoked by a mere 500 refugees in Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2005.⁷⁷

Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbours have generally been quite poor over the years. Some in the region have expressed hope that its new closeness with Russia will lead to an improvement. Particular hope has been put in the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), established in 2000 to promote economic cooperation between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan formally joined in January 2005. EURASEC membership means Uzbekistan will, in theory, have to abandon visa regimes for citizens of other member states and ease restrictions on trade. "We are very optimistic about this", a Kazakh official said. "Uzbekistan will now have to begin economic liberalisation, and this will lead in turn to greater freedoms".⁷⁸ Western observers are somewhat more sceptical. "We've been talking about regional integration for years", a diplomat said, "and we would be astonished if the Russians could make it happen. It would mean the Uzbeks have to share markets which they don't want to share and grant freedoms which they don't want to grant".⁷⁹

⁷² Crisis Group interview, January 2006.

⁷³ At a 31 January 2006 press conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated his endorsement of the Uzbek government's version of the Andijon events, yet hinted that he himself was somewhat less than sanguine about the domestic situation: "[W]e know better than you [journalists] who – [and] where, and in what amount – prepared those people who inflamed the situation in Uzbekistan and, in particular, in that city [Andijon]. This doesn't exclude that there are very many problems in Uzbekistan, but it excludes an approach of ours through which we could stir up, through which we could allow ourselves to stir up the situation in that country". The text of the press conference is available on the Kremlin's official website, president.kremlin.ru.

⁷⁴ "Uzbeks Look for Eastern Promise," Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *Reporting Central Asia*, N°414, 8 October 2005.

⁷⁵ The members of the SCO are Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

⁷⁶ China has shown some interest in supporting small business development in Uzbekistan. In early January 2006, for example, the China Development Bank (CDB) provided Uzbekistan with a \$20 million loan for this purpose. ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 4 January 2006 [via BBC Monitoring].

⁷⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Astana, January 2006.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

A. KAZAKHSTAN

Given its relatively robust economy and easy access to countries outside Central Asia, Kazakhstan could weather instability in Uzbekistan most readily. The greatest concern comes from its potential treatment of Uzbek refugees. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's desire to maintain control raises concerns about the welcome refugees might receive; the case of Lutfullo Shamsuddinov, mentioned above, is troubling. Kazakhstan might also be sensitive to Uzbek charges of "harbouring terrorists", especially after allegations that some of those involved in the spate of terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in 2004 were based in southern Kazakhstan.⁸⁰

Kazakhstan is often held up as a model of economic and political progress in the region, and it is clear that its influence in both areas can only grow as time passes. Yet there are reasons for worry as well. ODIHR⁸¹ found that the recent presidential election, which Nazarbayev won with a reported 91 per cent of the vote, fell short of international standards,⁸² which raises questions about the appropriateness of unconditional support. While Kazakhstan relies much less on external aid than many of its neighbours and thus is less subject to economic leverage from outside, the government is lobbying to head the OSCE in 2009. This bid seems to be winning some supporters but should only be considered if Kazakhstan makes a commitment to upholding the values which the organisation espouses. Respect for human rights – including those of refugees and asylum seekers – must be a priority.

B. KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan is the most vulnerable state in Central Asia. The government of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev is plagued by internal divisions, and its popular support is waning.⁸³ A number of long-simmering local conflicts and disputes present opportunities to be exploited by a hostile neighbour. The security forces are divided and demoralised. There are risks that militant or criminal groups might take advantage of weakened state control.

⁸⁰ See Igor Rotar, "Kazakhstan extradites suspected Islamic militant to Uzbekistan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, Issue 119, 3 November 2004.

⁸¹ The Office for Democratic Institution's and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

⁸² See ODIHR's interim report on the presidential election, available at http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2005/12/17_232_en.pdf.

⁸³ For more on Kyrgyzstan, see Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit., and Crisis Group Asia Report N°97, *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution*, 4 May 2005.

Kyrgyzstan relies on Uzbekistan for many of its energy needs, in particular natural gas. Uzbek enclaves on its territory pose infrastructural challenges, especially Sokh, which sits astride the only major road linking the capital, Bishkek, with the southernmost region of Batken and northern Tajikistan. A bypass road winds through the mountains around the enclave but it is in extremely poor condition and mostly impassable in winter.

On the plus side, Kyrgyzstan now has acquired at least a little experience in dealing with refugees and may be relatively better prepared than some of its neighbours in dealing with future crises. Having seen the difficulties that a few hundred refugees posed, however, Kyrgyz authorities will hardly be eager to accept more. Some officials accuse the West of failing to appreciate their problems. "It's very easy to come from Washington or Geneva and tell us what we have to do with these or those fugitives", one said. "But the simple fact is that we have to coexist with the Uzbeks".⁸⁴ This leads to resentment as well. "It seems that the West is taking advantage of the fact that we're on our knees right now to use us to pressure Karimov", another official said.⁸⁵

C. TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan is extremely poor and has yet to recover from a civil war.⁸⁶ Fears of another outbreak of conflict have dampened dissent and brought some stability but the country faces daunting challenges. Reforms have been slow and half-hearted. The government has become increasingly authoritarian and less cooperative with Western donors since the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Money from drugs trafficking has had a corrosive effect on security and institution building.

Relations with Uzbekistan have at times been severely strained. In recent years, the countries have accused each other of harbouring dangerous insurgents.⁸⁷ Tajikistan is

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2006.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2006.

⁸⁶ For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°33, *Tajikistan's Politics: Consolidation or Confrontation*, 19 May 2004; Crisis Group Asia Report N°5, *Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development*, 24 April 2003; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°30, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, 24 December 2001.

⁸⁷ For example, in 1998 Mahmud Khudoyberdiyev, a former colonel in the Tajik military, attacked the northern province of Sughd from Uzbekistan, to which he later withdrew. Rumours about the continued presence of Khudoyberdiyev's forces in Uzbekistan have been rife in Tajikistan ever since. In 1999 and 2000, guerrillas of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) staged raids into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from bases inside Tajikistan. IMU fighters once had close ties with elements of Tajikistan's Islamist opposition.

even more heavily dependent on Uzbekistan for energy than Kyrgyzstan as it lacks a border with resource-rich Kazakhstan. With virtually no gas of its own, it relies on imports from Uzbekistan.⁸⁸ During the winter months, it faces severe electricity shortages, with strict rationing in place for most areas outside the capital. An example is the heavily populated northern province of Sughd, which relies on imported electricity to meet most of its needs.⁸⁹

Despite efforts to construct an all-weather road, the north and south are cut off from each other for up to six months of the year, with the only connections passing through Uzbekistan. A tunnel is being built through the 3,373-meter-high Anzob Pass but progress has been painfully slow. Although there has been some investment in developing north-south routes by building bridges across the Panj River to Afghanistan and improving the road running northeast from Dushanbe through the Rasht Valley to the border with Kyrgyzstan's Osh province, Tajikistan remains heavily dependent on access to Uzbekistan and is thus anxious to avoid anything that would antagonise its neighbour.⁹⁰

Tajikistan has pinned many of its development hopes on the expansion of its lucrative aluminium industry.⁹¹ This centres around the TadAZ aluminium smelting plant, one of the largest in the world, located in the city of Tursunzoda on the Uzbek border. In October 2004, following a meeting between Putin and Tajik President Emomali Rahmonov, the Russian company RusAl pledged to invest \$2 billion to modernise and expand TadAZ.⁹² Yet here, too, Tajikistan has encountered hostility from its neighbour. In late 2005 vehement protests came from Uzbek specialists, who claimed that the plant was polluting

adjacent Uzbek territories and that its planned expansion should not go forward.⁹³ Many in Dushanbe consider Uzbek protests politically motivated.⁹⁴ On a recent visit to Uzbekistan, RusAl head Deripaska pledged to put environmental concerns first; some see this as a sign that Moscow may be nudging him away from Dushanbe and towards Tashkent.⁹⁵

Tajik border posts tend to be poorly manned and equipped, sometimes unable to communicate with Dushanbe in an emergency. Mines present a danger along certain stretches of the Uzbek border;⁹⁶ although the Uzbek government claims that demining has begun, Tajik authorities remain sceptical.⁹⁷

D. TURKMENISTAN

Saparmurat Niyazov, head of one of the world's most closed, repressive, and unpredictable regimes, governs a country whose income from vast petrochemical resources provides a gold-and-marble veneer over potentially devastating social and economic problems.⁹⁸ The public health and education sectors have been gutted over the years, and no political institutions exist independent of Niyazov. While Niyazov is in power, a semblance of stability exists but the potential for a grave humanitarian and political crisis is growing year by year.

Turkmenistan's traditional isolation, even from its immediate neighbours, may lessen the impact of regional instability somewhat, as may its distance from Uzbekistan's

⁸⁸ In 2005, Tajikistan imported a reported 650 million cubic metres of gas from Uzbekistan; it is expected to import 750 million cubic metres in 2006. Avesta news agency, 25 November 2005.

⁸⁹ The large Qayroqqum hydroelectric plant near the provincial capital of Khujand reportedly can supply only 20 per cent of the region's energy needs in the fall and winter. A recently completed line between Tajikistan's Konibodom and Kyrgyzstan's Batken can provide an additional 30 per cent but Tajikistan must purchase the remainder from Uzbekistan. BBC Monitoring, 10 January 2005. Stalled Uzbek-Tajik negotiations over electricity supplies in November 2005 led to a severe shortage of energy in Sughd., *RFE/RL Newslines*, 28 November 2005.

⁹⁰ Tajikistan is not, however, entirely without leverage: it sits at the source of the rivers on which Uzbekistan relies for irrigation. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°34, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, 30 May 2002.

⁹¹ In 2004, aluminium products made up an estimated 49 per cent of Tajikistan's exports. U.S. Department of State country profile, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5775.htm#econ>.

⁹² The head of RusAl, oligarch Oleg Deripaska, is said to have very close ties with the Kremlin.

⁹³ "Yu. Shadimetov. 'Nasha tsel' – nedopushchenie rasshireniia proizvodstva na TadAZe!" [Yu. Shadimetov: "Our goal is not to allow the expansion of TadAZ production!"], Avesta news agency, 15 October 2005.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, December 2005.

⁹⁵ See, for instance, Julie A. Corwin, "Central Asia: Is Russian aluminum forsaking Tajikistan for Uzbekistan?", *RFE/RL* 7 December 2005.

⁹⁶ Uzbekistan began unilaterally to mine certain stretches of its border (including areas yet to be demarcated) with northern Tajikistan following armed incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from Tajik territory in 1999 and 2000. The mines have resulted in dozens of civilian fatalities. Crisis Group Asia Report N°33, *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*, 4 April 2002.

⁹⁷ In a 6 December 2005 press release, on file with Crisis Group, the Uzbek embassy in Tajikistan claimed that demining had begun in 2004 and some areas had since been all but cleared. Tajik officials, however, say they have seen no signs of such activity. Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, January 2006.

⁹⁸ For more information, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°85, *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy*, 4 November 2004; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°44, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, 17 January 2003.

main population centres, the most likely sources of future refugee flows. However, the presence of large numbers of ethnic Uzbeks within its own borders means that it cannot afford to assume that it would remain unaffected.

E. AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan shares only a very short border with Uzbekistan, and trade and other links have been slow to develop. Nonetheless, international efforts at stabilisation and nation-building there can be successful only if the situation in surrounding countries is likewise stable. Moreover, the improvement of trade, energy, and communications ties with Central Asia (especially Tajikistan) is extremely important for the development of its northern regions.

V. WAYS FORWARD

A. SHORT TERM

1. Smart sanctions and voluntary restrictions

As a way of pushing countries towards political change, sanctions are a blunt tool, often doing more harm than good. Nonetheless, “smart sanctions” should be part of the approach to Uzbekistan, including a visa ban list like that developed by the EU but expanded to include senior members of the regime not directly implicated in the Andijon events but suspected of violations of human rights or illegal practices.

While a total boycott of Uzbek cotton is likely not feasible due to the number of steps between harvest of the crop and sale of finished textiles in the wider world, the three Uzbek companies handling the majority of the country’s cotton exports are believed to have links to the security services, which relies in part on income from the sales.⁹⁹ Western cotton buyers should be encouraged to curtail their business dealings with these companies and to seek other partners with less dubious pedigrees.

2. Engagement with China and Russia

Given the realignment of Uzbekistan towards Russia and China, any strategy for dealing with Uzbekistan must take these two countries into account, however difficult this is likely to be. While their views differ from those of the West on many key points – not least the Andijon events and the Uzbek response – all parties share an interest in

stability. Russia and China are not likely to see eye to eye with the West on issues of human rights and democracy, yet may be more amenable to helping nudge the Uzbek government towards some degree of economic liberalisation, thereby making life at least that much more tolerable for ordinary Uzbeks and possibly reducing tensions. As Russian and Chinese investments grow, this would seem to be in their own best interests. The difficulties of pressing this issue do not mean it should remain off the agenda. Likewise, Western governments should carefully monitor Russian security engagements in the region to ensure that their forces are not involved in human rights abuses as they have been in the Caucasus.

3. Engagement with the Uzbek government

Though this is becoming increasingly difficult, there are still areas in which Tashkent seems willing to cooperate. Cooperation should, however, be limited to projects which are aimed at improving the lot of the most vulnerable citizens (particularly rural women and children, and labour migrants).¹⁰⁰ Work in these areas, which include rural development and health care, should be continued and, if possible, expanded. By no means should international policies cause ordinary Uzbeks to suffer for their government’s misdeeds.

At the same time, there should be no let up in calls for the Uzbek government to allow an independent investigation of the Andijon affair, with the stated aim not of unearthing misdeeds of the security forces, but of providing a full, detailed, and unbiased account of the events, their context, and their aftermath. It should be made clear that Tashkent must take the first concrete step towards normalising relationships by allowing an investigation. The OSCE should consider invoking the “Moscow Mechanism”, which allows for creation of an ad hoc commission of independent experts to investigate issues of human security in any member state.¹⁰¹ Although Uzbekistan is unlikely to cooperate, a report would keep the issue alive and reaffirm commitments to the core values of the OSCE.

⁹⁹ For more information, see Crisis Group Report *The Curse of Cotton*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ For example, in an effort to prove to the public that the government strives to advance the living standards of its people, President Karimov declared 2005 the “Year of Good Health”, and Uzbekistan negotiated a \$40 million loan with the Asian Development Bank to finance a “Woman and Child Health Development Project”, prepared and implemented in parallel with a World Bank-funded project. “Workshop Launches ADB’s Woman and Child Health Project in Uzbekistan”, 4 April 2005, at <http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/URM/urm-2005-02.asp>.

¹⁰¹ The only time the “Moscow Mechanism” has been invoked in Central Asia was to study the Turkmen authorities’ investigation of the attempt to assassinate President Niyazov on 25 November 2002.

B. LONG TERM

Long-term strategies should serve two ends. First, they should provide “lifeboat strategies” for Uzbekistan, strengthening its capacity to weather instability and possible regime change. Secondly, they should strengthen the capacity of neighbouring states, both to resist Uzbekistan’s ability to exert pressure on them by closing roads and denying vital energy resources and to withstand the negative impact of possible future instability in that country, particularly in the case of refugee flows.

1. Media development

Though increasingly difficult to implement on the ground, media development and freedom of information projects are still possible for Uzbekistan and should form a well-funded part of the international community’s activity. For instance, donors should consider:

- supporting an independent journalism training centre for the region. The trainers and lecturers should be experienced Central Asian journalists who ideally would teach only part-time so their practical skills would not dull. The centre should make special efforts to reach out to Uzbekistan’s journalists with both short training programs and longer in-residence possibilities for teachers and students;
- establishing a Central Asian news network, with anonymous correspondents throughout Uzbekistan and editors in Almaty or Bishkek to coordinate their reports and protect their identities. These dispatches could be provided to international news agencies and thus offer regional and wider media access to independent daily information from across Uzbekistan;
- seeking new avenues for broadcasting information into Uzbekistan. These might include direct-to-home satellite transmissions, as well as broadcasts from FM radio stations just over the border if political reluctance in the neighbouring countries can be overcome;
- expanding online news services. Internet access is limited within the country but online reports are read by the most influential and best educated – both those in the current regime and, presumably, anyone likely to play a major role in a future government; and
- establishing a protection fund to help journalists in need, with support such as legal assistance, short-term accommodation abroad, assistance with asylum applications, job placement and the like. The

international community should look favourably on asylum applications that result.¹⁰²

2. Education

Providing high-quality education for Uzbeks is becoming increasingly difficult but is vital if an open society is to emerge. Donors should:

- expand opportunities for Uzbeks to study abroad, mostly in neighbouring countries but also in Europe and the U.S.,¹⁰³ and
- offer more educational material through television and radio broadcasts into the country.

3. Dealing with possible refugees

If there is further instability in Uzbekistan, it is reasonable to assume there will be refugee flows on a much larger scale.¹⁰⁴ Neighbouring countries will require international support if they are to honour their obligations and maintain internal stability. Donors should:

- provide training on refugee issues and technical support for “first responders” (border forces, state migration services, ministries of internal affairs and emergency situations);
- help in the renovation and upkeep of border checkpoints;
- encourage contingency planning between the relevant ministries and agencies to ensure a rapid and coordinated response to population displacements of any kind;
- provide education for government agencies, ministries, and citizens (particularly in border areas) on rights of refugees and obligations of countries under international law;

¹⁰² Unfortunately, this was not always the case after the Andijon massacre, when many Western embassies refused to help individual Uzbek journalists who found themselves pursued by the authorities because of their reporting of events.

¹⁰³ Women might be offered extra incentives and support, as they make up only 39 per cent of Uzbeks in the higher education system. “Gender Statistics: Women and Men in Uzbekistan”, UNDP, 2002.

¹⁰⁴ Despite measures to strengthen them, Uzbekistan’s borders with southern Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan are extremely porous and in many areas unguarded and undemarcated, making illegal crossings easy. The areas along the border are very mixed ethnically, with large numbers of ethnic Uzbeks on both sides. Many local families have relatives in all three countries. In the event of unrest in Uzbekistan, then, the possibility of people crossing into Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan and seeking shelter with relatives or friends is high.

- increase coordination between relevant international agencies (UN, OSCE, IOM,¹⁰⁵ ICRC¹⁰⁶) as well as embassies throughout the region; and
- begin inter-agency contingency planning and stockpiling of necessary emergency supplies at likely points of entry for refugees.

4. Infrastructure and development

Uzbekistan can exert pressure on its neighbours by closing border posts on vital access roads (sometimes within the territory of a neighbouring state, as in the case of the enclave of Sokh inside Kyrgyzstan) and by not delivering energy. Improving the transportation and energy independence of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would go far to prevent Tashkent acting as a regional spoiler. Measures that should be considered include:

- support for the construction of roads. The U.S., the Aga Khan Development Network, and others are funding the construction of bridges across the Panj River to Afghanistan; Japan is funding the renovation of the road between the border regions of Panji Poyon and Dustī; and the Asian Development Bank and China are funding the renovation of the Dushanbe-Osh road. Funding for renovation of the Khujand-Batken-Osh road, particularly the bypass around the Sokh enclave, would be a useful addition;
- promotion of north-south trade through such measures as the establishment of free-trade zones at border crossing points. This has begun in a small scale on the Tajik-Afghan border at Ishkoshim and Darvoz and should be expanded to other areas (including the Tajik-Kyrgyz and Kyrgyz-Kazakh borders);
- assistance in the construction of hydroelectric plants. Russian and Iranian investors have already shown interest in developing these in Tajikistan, whose government is also seeking investors to fund a plant at Dashtijum on the Afghan border. Donors should support the widespread use of small hydroelectric plants in remote areas;
- promotion of further energy sharing between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that cannot be obstructed by Uzbekistan;
- greater efforts to boost the effectiveness of institutions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including more assistance to parliaments, judiciaries, police and security agencies, as well as NGOs, with a view to increasing respect for human rights and democratic norms and challenging

the messages from Russia and China that a more authoritarian approach is likely to be more successful;

- more help to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for dealing with their debts, tied to benchmarked improvements in governance; and
- development by donors of a fuller trade and transport plan to link Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with Afghanistan and Pakistan. These countries tend to look north to Moscow but there are growing markets to their south that could be expanded. Any plan should be structured in a way that it is not dependent upon the cooperation of Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

VI. CONCLUSION

For many years, the international community has promoted the idea of regional integration in Central Asia. Local governments have often paid lip service. Regional integration should be maintained as a long-term goal but as long as Uzbekistan is able to bully its weaker neighbours at will, it will remain a dream. This is not to say Uzbekistan should be deliberately isolated. Yet, true regional cooperation will only be possible if the individual Central Asian states are first able to stand on their own and deal with each other as equals.

The current superficial stability in Uzbekistan should not obscure the fact that further unrest is a strong possibility. The government has driven large parts of the populace to desperation, and anger is just below the surface. While a large uprising or “colour revolution” seems highly unlikely in the short term, localised unrest and even violence cannot be ruled out. Even the “palace coup” or “soft landing” scenarios carry certain dangers; Karimov’s departure, however and whenever it occurs, is likely to be accompanied by intense internal power struggles, which could also lead to violence. The destruction of civil society and the absence of independent political institutions, combined with endemic corruption and abuses of power at all levels of government, likewise provide fertile soil for militant Islamist groups.

Further violence in Uzbekistan would present a direct threat to the stability of the region as a whole. The international community must consider creative long-term strategies for dealing with Uzbekistan and the region.

Bishkek/Brussels 16 February 2006

¹⁰⁵ International Organisation for Migration.

¹⁰⁶ International Committee of the Red Cross.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF UZBEKISTAN





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