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Violence in Uzbekistan: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report examines the bombings and other civil unrest that occurred in Uzbekistan on March 28-April 1, 2004. Implications for Uzbekistan and U.S. relations and assistance are examined. This report may be updated. Related products include RS21238, *Uzbekistan*; and Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia*, updated regularly.

Background¹

Since gaining independence after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan has been led by its former communist leader, Islam Karimov. It has made little or no progress since then in democratization, market reforms, and respect for human rights, and has regressed in some areas, according to many observers. The World Bank reports that the quality of life for most of the population of twenty-five million — the largest of any state in Central Asia — has improved little or deteriorated in terms of healthcare, education, housing, and income. The Karimov government has moved harshly to stifle dissent by jailing and torturing thousands of alleged political opponents and Islamic extremists, according to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003*.

Uzbekistan has suffered several terrorist attacks in recent years aimed at overthrowing the Karimov government. In 1999, car bombings occurred in Tashkent (the capital). Several hundred suspects were detained and several dozen were convicted on charges of belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) terrorist group. In late 1999 and late 2000, Islamic extremists led by the IMU launched attacks against Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but were repelled. Another expected attack in 2001 was presumably pre-empted in part by the IMU's focus on assisting al Qaeda and Taliban forces in fighting against U.S.-led coalition forces. The activities of the IMU and other

¹ Sources for this report include the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*; *Eurasia Insight*; *Johnson's List*; the State Department's *Washington File*; and *Reuters*, *Agence France Presse* (AFP), *Associated Press* (AP), and other newswires.

terrorist groups based in Afghanistan were disrupted by coalition forces, according to the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, but Kyrgyzstani and other observers have warned that the IMU and other groups recently may be regaining strength.

Recent Developments

A series of bombings and armed attacks began in Uzbekistan on March 28, 2004, and continued through April 1. In the Bukhara region (west of the capital of Tashkent), a large explosion occurred at a house where bombs were being made, killing a dozen or more. Reportedly, hundreds of pounds of ingredients for explosives as well as Islamic extremist literature were discovered there. During the night, police apprehended a suspect carrying several bombs in Tashkent, and two police posts in Tashkent were attacked. On the morning of March 29, two suicide bombers blew themselves up at the Chorsu bazaar, where some anti-Karimov protests had occurred in past weeks. One of the suicide bombers apparently targeted a group of police at the bazaar, killing or injuring about a dozen. Some of these police may have been involved in the reported beating death of an aged shopkeeper the previous day. The attacks continued on March 30 with a car bombing at a police checkpoint and an armed siege between militants and police near a residence of President Karimov just north of Tashkent, reportedly killing about two dozen people. On the night of March 31-April 1, a suspect in Tashkent tried to elude police and hid in a house, where after a siege he blew himself up. Another explosion in the Bukhara region occurred on April 1, which Uzbek officials attributed to relatives of the bomber who was killed in the explosion on March 28.

In response to the attacks, Uzbekistan closed its borders, cancelled public events and closed schools in Tashkent, and boosted the number of checkpoints and police patrols. Reportedly many people stayed home or left Tashkent. Uzbekistan's tightly controlled media prevented most independent news and the government released little information on the attacks. The dearth of news appeared to contribute to apprehension among many citizens. The main sources of information were Russian and foreign broadcasts.

President Karimov asserted in a nationally televised interview on March 29 that the attacks were aimed against his government, in order to "cause panic among our people, to make them lose their trust in the policies being carried out..., and to obstruct our ... work" (*FBIS*, Mar. 30, 2004, Doc. No. CEP-155). He suggested that "evil" terrorists had coordinated and planned the operations for months, and claimed that they were directed from abroad. To investigate the attacks, he announced that he had formed a commission composed of officials from the Interior (police) Ministry, National Security Service, and procuracy. He also stated that he had mobilized similar commissions in all regions, districts, and towns, and called on neighborhood groups and citizens to "unite like a fist" to "prevent these acts from spreading." Some believed that Karimov appeared to sanction the torture of suspects by asserting that the attackers would be brought "into the light, if need be by pulling their ears." A Russian newspaper alleged that Uzbek police, already enraged by being targeted, had been given permission to use force against suspects (*Kommersant*, Apr. 1). Perhaps responding to international criticism, Karimov on April 7 stated that he had cautioned his security forces to stop indiscriminate detentions (*AP*, Apr. 7).

Prosecutor-General Rashidjon Qodirov on April 9 announced that a preliminary investigation had shown that Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT; an Islamic fundamentalist movement

ostensibly pledged to peace, but banned in Uzbekistan), in league with the IMU and other terrorists, had carried out the attacks. Dismissing views that HT was pacific, he asserted that seized documents indicated that its goal was the forcible overthrow of the Karimov government and the establishment of a caliphate. He alleged that secret HT cells had been operating since 2000 and received instructions and financing from a foreign-based “emir” whom he would not identify. He reported that large caches of improvised explosive devices, chemicals for bombs, firearms, and ammunition had been discovered in the Tashkent and Bukhara regions, and that seized computer files indicated that some HT members had received training in Pakistan and other countries. He assured Uzbeks that over 1,000 people had been “interrogated,” and that several dozen had been formally charged with involvement in the attacks. He stated that the government had made use of extensive lists it had compiled of suspicious individuals to screen. Several women were arrested in early April after they protested against the re-arrest of their husbands — who had been released from prison on amnesty but presumably were still on the lists — in the wake of the bombings.

The Uzbek branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir allegedly issued a statement on April 2 accusing the government of having launched a new crackdown on the group after Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Tashkent in late February 2004. Nonetheless, it denied that its members had retaliated by attacking the government. On April 9, a previously unknown “Islamic Jihad Group” claimed responsibility for the attacks, justifying them as blows against an “infidel” Uzbek government that tortured and imprisoned Muslims.

Implications for Uzbekistan

Theories about the causes of the attacks in Uzbekistan center around strikes against authority by disgruntled citizens, perhaps supported by international terrorist groups, or a coup attempt by part of the ruling elite. Some observers who view the attacks as signs of disgruntlement suggest that some political opponents or religious Muslims who feel they are not able to worship freely may be targeting their perceived oppressors and committing suicide to draw attention to their plight. Other observers attribute the attacks to anger over unrelenting poverty or the recent tightening of border controls over trade that harmed the livelihoods of many people. Uzbek activist Surat Ikramov, the head of the Independent Human Rights Initiatives Group in Tashkent, reflected these views by suggesting on April 6 that the apparent targeting of the police was “a protest against the regime.” Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid likewise suggested on April 1 that the attackers may have intended to publicize their cause and gain adherents. On the other hand, exiled opposition Erk Party head Mohammad Solikh, while deploring the attacks, argued on April 3 that the attackers may have been hoping to trigger a nationwide revolt against the “repressive” Karimov. Some observers speculate that such a plan may have been foiled in part when the explosion in Bukhara on March 28 prematurely exposed it. Solikh and some other political and religious opponents of the government even have speculated that the government arranged the attacks in order to justify a new crackdown.

Uzbek officials insisted that the attacks were orchestrated from abroad, arguing in part that suicide bombings were unusual in Uzbekistan. However, instances of self-immolation are not unheard of. These usually involve young women in personal distress, but one case in February 2004 in western Uzbekistan — when police taunted a man even after he set fire to himself to protest their extortion — may have helped spur the recent

attacks against police, according to some observers. Uzbek Foreign Minister Sodiq Safoyev and other officials also argued that the attacks represented international terrorism aimed at governments that support coalition actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One variant of the theory that elite groups may be battling for political power centers around Karimov's alleged illness and contention between the Ministry of Internal (police) Affairs and the Ministry of National Security. According to this theory, one elite group or another may have taken advantage of the attacks, if not tacitly supported them, in order to undermine a competitor for power or to seize power in case the attacks triggered a popular uprising. However, there is as yet little evidence that major personnel shifts within the government are occurring.

The aftermath of the attacks has witnessed tighter censorship of media and other increased human rights abuses, according to some observers. They note that the government tightened limits on foreign media reporting and particularly criticized Russian reporting that might be more accessible to Uzbeks. They warn that by blaming HT, Karimov may aim for even harsher repression of religious and political dissidents. Prisons already contain nearly 6,000 alleged members of HT and others punished for religious and political reasons, according to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003*. Evidence of new repression included Ikramov's report on April 6 that large-scale detentions appeared underway, including of whole families. The nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch on April 14 condemned alleged arbitrary arrests and torture by Uzbek security forces in the wake of the attacks.

Most countries and international organizations have appeared to sympathize with Uzbekistan's efforts to apprehend the attackers, and few publicly have criticized alleged abuses of human rights during these efforts. More generally, Uzbekistan's reform failures led the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to announce on April 6 that it would sharply limit its lending to Uzbekistan. It cited the failure to register opposition political parties, the continuing torture of detainees and prisoners, media restrictions, and inadequate payments to cotton farmers.

Implications for U.S. Interests

According to the State Department, Uzbekistan "is a key strategic partner in the Global War on Terror," and "consistently support[s] U.S. foreign policy goals." However, it also states that Uzbekistan's poor human rights record complicates bilateral relations (*Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations for FY2005*). In her testimony on April 8 to the Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice emphasized that pre-9/11 Administration initiatives included increasing counterterrorist aid to Uzbekistan. Major U.S. concerns in the wake of the violence in Uzbekistan include increased instability that could affect the security and future of the coalition base at Karshi Khanabad (K2), reduce coalition access to Afghanistan by air or ground transport, and heighten the danger of the leakage through or from Uzbekistan of Soviet-era weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology or know-how. Before the attacks, the *Washington Post* (Mar. 25) had reported that the Administration might be evaluating Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for long-term access to military facilities for emergency training and staging by rapid-reaction forces. The attacks in Uzbekistan might affect this evaluation. During his February 24, 2004, visit to Uzbekistan, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated that there were no plans

for permanent U.S. bases in Central Asia, but that issues of U.S. basing strategy worldwide had been discussed, including possible “operating sites ... where the United States and coalition countries could periodically and intermittently have access and support.”

The U.S. government eschewed early judgments about the attacks but seemed to defer to Uzbekistan’s view that international terrorists threatened the peace. After the first bombings on March 29, the White House condemned the loss of life and vowed to cooperate with Uzbekistan and “other partners in the global war on terror ... to defeat terrorists wherever they hide and strike.” The U.S. Embassy, on heightened alert status as a result of earlier threats, suspended some operations. The State Department issued a new public announcement on March 30 warning U.S. citizens that the IMU, al Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement remained active in the region and that the groups “have expressed anti-U.S. sentiments and may also attempt to target U.S. Government or private interests in Uzbekistan.” On March 30, Secretary Powell called the Uzbek foreign minister and offered U.S. aid in the investigation of the attacks. The State Department on March 31 seemed to downplay reports of police abuses during the terrorist investigation by stating that “we’ve got to ... balance the need for respecting rights, liberties and the rule of law and moving decisively against terror,” but also added that “it doesn’t need to be an either/or proposition.” President Bush phoned Karimov on April 2 and reportedly offered condolences to the victims of internationally-linked terrorism, and also stressed that the search for the attackers should comply with the rule of law.

The United States, Russia, and the regional states have raised concerns that the attacks in Uzbekistan could have implications for wider destabilization in Central Asia. Such concerns were discussed at a regular meeting of the U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counter-Terrorism on March 31-April 1, with the Russian emissary stating that the attacks illustrated the need for closer U.S.-Russian anti-terrorism cooperation. The two sides issued a statement calling for the Central Asian states to create a financial action task force to combat money laundering that finances terrorism. The Central Asian rapid-reaction anti-terrorism forces formed by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) apparently did not respond to the attacks, but the CIS Antiterrorism Center announced that it would study the suicide bombings for future prevention. Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly will discuss enhanced antiterrorist cooperation with the visiting Uzbek president in mid-April. After the attacks in Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz government stepped up arrests of HT members.

Heightened concerns in the United States that authoritarianism in Uzbekistan could be contributing to the growth of Islamic extremism as a channel of dissent led some policymakers to call for cutting aid that might bolster the regime. However, other concerns about WMD proliferation led the Administration at the end of 2003 to waive restrictions on most anti-terrorism aid to Uzbekistan under authority provided by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2003 (P.L.107-314). The Administration indicated that Uzbekistan had not satisfied Congressional requirements to respect human rights, as contained in Sec.1203(d)(6) of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Act of 1993 (P.L.103-160), making the waiver necessary. CTR funds have been used in Uzbekistan to dismantle a Soviet-era chemical weapons research facility and eliminate active anthrax spores at a former test site. Other CTR aid helps keep Uzbek weapons scientists employed in peaceful research. Research reactors, uranium mines, and milling facilities in Uzbekistan also pose proliferation concerns.

After the attacks in Uzbekistan, the State Department stressed the need for continued U.S. strategic engagement, and pointed out that Secretary Rumsfeld's recent February 2004 visit had not only involved security cooperation but also his call for the creation of a multiparty democracy. The State Department's Performance Plans for FY2004 and FY2005 envisage raising Uzbekistan's levels of democratization and respect for civil liberties (as scored by Freedom House, a human rights organization), but these goals appear elusive, according to some observers. These observers argue that as long as the United States gives substantial assistance to Uzbekistan, it will ignore calls for democratization (*Financial Times*, Apr. 1). The *Washington Post* (Apr. 1) also warned that if Karimov "perpetuate[s] his police state with U.S. support," the country would continue to breed terrorists and that anti-Americanism among Uzbeks would increase.

Congressional concerns about human rights conditions in Uzbekistan have been reflected in legislation and other action. In FY2002, Congressional conferees directed the State Department to assure it that defense and financial aid was not being used by the Uzbek government to violate human rights (H.Rept.107-345; H.Rept.107-593). In FY2003 and FY2004, Congress forbade FREEDOM Support Act assistance to the central government of Uzbekistan unless the Secretary of State determined and reported that Uzbekistan was making substantial progress in meeting commitments to respect human rights, establish a multiparty system, and ensure free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and the independence of the media (P.L.108-7; P.L.108-199). Congress received such assurances and determinations of progress in FY2002-FY2003, but such a determination may not be possible for FY2004. Planned FREEDOM Support aid to Uzbekistan for FY2004 is \$36 million, of which some portion may need to be reprogrammed from central government to civil society or other areas if a determination of progress is not possible.

The State Department must also soon determine whether Uzbekistan is making progress in implementing religious freedom reforms under provisions of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-292). The Act calls for a range of possible diplomatic or economic sanctions against "countries of particular concern" that have been designated as hostile toward minority or non-approved religions and do not reform (alternatively, the President may waive action on national security grounds).

Among other Congressional action, a delegation visited Uzbekistan in early April 2004, where Rep. David Dreier impressed upon Uzbek officials that the attacks highlighted the need for greater political and economic freedom in the country (U.S. Embassy, Tashkent, *Press Release*, Apr. 5). Uzbek Foreign Minister Safoyev reportedly stressed to the delegation that cutting off aid would be a mistake and asserted that Uzbekistan was making progress on human rights and economic reforms.