



Uzbekistan Accused of Conducting War on Islam

Accusations of Torture Rage Inside Uzbekistan

By WILLEM MARX

Nov. 23, 2006— - Uzbekistan's strategic alliance with the United States -- forged soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks -- is unraveling, officials said, due to the government's failure to reform and stop the ongoing persecution of its Islamic citizens.

The Central Asian country, which borders Afghanistan, was once deemed an important potential partner by Presidents Clinton and Bush, and a U.S. airbase in the south of the country became a jumping off point for American troops attacking the Taliban inside Afghanistan.

But that relationship changed irrevocably last May, when Uzbekistan's government forces were accused of massacring several hundred civilians in the city of Andijan, and human rights organizations cried foul.

In August, a well-respected Islamic cleric who often criticized the Uzbek authorities was shot to death as he passed through a police checkpoint. Uzbekistan's government-controlled media described the killing of Muhammadrafik Kamilov as "the elimination of a suspected militant," while friends and family, who deny he was involved with armed extremists, called his death an extra-judicial assassination.

In September, another cleric, who once preached at one of the largest mosques in the capital Tashkent, was sentenced to 17 years in prison for his role in an Islamic terrorist organization. The parents of the cleric, Rukhiddin Fakhruddinov, claim that the charges were entirely fabricated, and that their son had been kidnapped in neighboring Kazakhstan as he sought political asylum with the United Nations. Another prominent cleric has recently been given asylum in Europe.

It was these and other attacks on Muslims that led the U.S. State Department to criticize Uzbekistan openly in November when John Hanford, the ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, announced the State Department's designation of Uzbekistan as a "country of particular concern" for its attacks on religion.

Uzbekistan joins a list of seven other CPC countries, including Saudi Arabia, China and North Korea. Hanford described how observant Muslims have said "they are afraid to be seen praying, attending mosque or otherwise expressing their faith," adding that "Muslims have long borne the brunt of the government of Uzbekistan's harsh repression."

Many U.S. critics question why American diplomats rarely mentioned this repression between 2001 and 2005, during a period when millions of dollars in aid and military support poured into the Uzbek regime.

Rachel Denber, an advocate for Central Asian affairs at Human Rights Watch, said that this repression has been "long-standing," and that it was unclear why Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to include

Uzbekistan on the CPC list was so long in coming.

A reminder of why the U.S. initially backed Uzbekistan's tough stance on extremists came in a November State Department travel warning, which highlighted the ongoing risks from violent Islamic extremists in the region. But according to State Department officials, Uzbekistan has failed to distinguish between genuine counterterrorism operations and unnecessary attacks on conservative Muslims. "It is clear that many of those harassed, abused, tortured and convicted of membership in extremist organizations are simply observant Muslims," Hanford said.

Many countries -- including the United States and United Kingdom -- face an ongoing struggle to separate conservative Muslims from dangerous Islamic extremists without infringing upon human rights. But according to other State Department officials, Uzbekistan's government may soon face sanctions for its failure to reform.

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