

Dozens Killed In Uzbekistan As Troops Open Fire

By Nick Allen in Moscow
The Telegraph - UK
5-14-5

Dozens of people were killed and injured when an uprising was brutally suppressed in eastern Uzbekistan yesterday as public anger at deprivation and restrictions on freedom erupted.

In the latest unrest to hit a former Soviet republic, government forces surrounded the city of Andizhan as tens of thousands of people gathered in the central square to protest against President Islam Karimov, who has ruled the central Asian republic with an iron fist since it won independence from Moscow in 1991.

As buildings burned around them, the crowd chanted anti-government slogans until armoured vehicles and troops advanced and opened fire, killing up to 50 people, according to unconfirmed reports.

The main thrust of the storming operation was toward the administration premises, where an estimated 100 gunmen were barricaded in.

Uzbek media reported explosions from the building

during the hour-long assault but there was no information about casualties inside.

The sudden eruption of violence capped weeks of peaceful demonstrations in Andizhan over the trial of 23 local businessmen on what supporters say are trumped-up religious extremism charges.

Fearing that the uprising could swell in a repeat of popular revolutions that installed new leaders in Georgia, Ukraine and neighbouring Kyrgyzstan in recent months, Mr Karimov rushed to the city.

But he issued no comments on the events and failed to make an expected television appearance. Late reports said he was returning to the capital, Tashkent, after the square was cleared.

The United States, which has hundreds of troops based in a country considered a key ally in the war on terror, called for the government and demonstrators to show restraint.

"The people of Uzbekistan want to see a more democratic government, but that should come through peaceful means, not through violence," said Scott McLellan, a White House spokesman.

The unrest started in the early hours of yesterday when armed relatives of the jailed men looted weapons from an army garrison in a surprise raid before releasing thousands of inmates from a prison.

They then marched on key buildings in the city of 320,000, which is located in the volatile Fergana Valley, about 150 miles from Tashkent.

The densely-populated, impoverished valley has emerged as a stronghold of Islamic extremism and a fertile recruiting ground for groups such as the banned

religious organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which has ties with al-Qa'eda, and aims to establish a separate Muslim state, or caliphate.

Anticipating official attempts to paint the events as a manifestation of extremism, some in the crowd shouted: "We are not extremists. We want democracy and work."

Mindful of a possible spillover into their own regions, neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan sealed their borders.

In Tashkent, a security guard at the Israeli embassy killed a man who approached the building with what proved to be a fake bomb.

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