

EU Easing of Uzbek Sanctions “Absurd”

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European foreign ministers accused of placing energy interests over human rights. Human rights activists in Uzbekistan and abroad have been left angry and disappointed at the European Union’s decision to relax sanctions against the country’s government, in the face of strong evidence that the regime is as oppressive as ever.

On October 15-16, EU foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg decided to suspend visa restrictions against eight top Uzbek officials who are accused of playing a part in the bloody suppression of a demonstration in the eastern city of Andijan in May 2005.

While official figures say 189 people were killed and over 500 wounded when Uzbek security forces opened fire on crowds of peaceful demonstrators in central Andijan on May 13 that year, some human rights groups have calculated that the figure is closer to 800.

In the wake of the uprising, the Uzbek authorities arrested anyone who they thought was involved in the protest or who even witnessed it, before embarking on a general crackdown on human rights activists and other dissenters across the country, and driving out the few remaining foreign organisations involved in civil-society, media development, and more innocuous cultural assistance programmes.

Civil society groups are angered at the EU’s decision to lift almost all sanctions against a country which they say continues to have one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world.

Surat Ikramov, the head of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Advocates of Uzbekistan, said relaxing sanctions was “absurd” because no international investigation into Andijan is even on the horizon.

“I think the EU should apply the kind of sanctions that any state would respond to,” he said.

As things stand, he said, “the Uzbek authorities are very flexible – they can certainly agree to dialogue and negotiations, but they will not fulfill conditions”.

The EU sanctions were imposed in November 2005, after President Islam Karimov’s government continued to refuse to allow an independent international inquiry into the massacre, first requested by United Nations human rights commissioner Louise Arbour and then by the US government.

The sanctions included a partial suspension of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which governs EU-Uzbek relations; an embargo on EU sales of weapons to Uzbekistan and a year-long visa ban on 12 top officials believed to have played a role in the use of force against demonstrators.

Despite Tashkent’s continuing refusal to allow an investigation, and much evidence suggesting there had been no substantive improvements to the human rights situation, EU foreign ministers lifted visa restrictions against four of the 12 officials on the travel blacklist when the sanctions came up for review in May 2007.

Human rights groups monitoring the situation in Uzbekistan judged that the already poor human rights situation deteriorated sharply after Andijan, and showed no sign of improvement during the “dialogue” instituted with Tashkent after the sanctions were prolonged in November 2006. (See IWPR’s story - “Should EU End Sanctions Against Uzbekistan?” RCA No. 492, 11-May-07 http://iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=335486&apc_state=henh)

Explaining its latest decision, the Council of the European Union said in a press release that it “remains seriously concerned about the human rights situation in Uzbekistan” and that the arms embargo and visa restrictions therefore would remain in place for another 12 months. However, in order to “encourage[e] the Uzbek authorities to take positive steps to improve the human rights situation”, the visa restrictions were being suspended for six months.

In return, the Uzbek government has to make “progress” towards meeting a number of benchmarks, which includes releasing human rights activists from prison, allowing non-government organisations to operate freely, and giving access to International Committee of the Red Cross visit detention centres.

The EU indicated that it had eased sanctions because of “positive steps” such as the Uzbek government’s increased willingness to engage in dialogue, the holding of “expert talks” on Andijan, and the conditional release of human rights defenders Umida Niazova and Gulbahor Turaeva, who were both imprisoned earlier this year after flawed trials.

The eight listed Uzbek security officials are still held “directly responsible for indiscriminating and disproportionate use of force in Andijan and the obstruction of an independent inquiry”, according to the EU statement, but they will now be free to travel to Europe for the next six months, and longer if the EU judges that progress has been made.

The serving officials listed are National Security Service chief Rustam Inoyatov; Ruslan Mirzoev, currently defence minister and formerly National Security Council adviser; Major-General Vladimir Mamo, deputy commander of the interior ministry’s special forces; Colonel Gregory Pak, commander of the ministry’s rapid reaction forces; Colonel Valery Tajiev, head of a special forces unit in the interior ministry; and Colonel Pavel Ergashev, who unlike the others commanded an armed forces unit under the defence ministry.

Two retired officials feature on the list – former interior minister Zokirjon Almatov and his deputy at the time Tohir Mullajonov.

According to Human Rights Watch and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, human rights advocates and thousands of people who were imprisoned on charges of religious extremism are still languishing in Uzbek prisons. Numerous reports over the years have documented flawed trials, fabricated cases, and the frequent torture of detainees.

“The argument being made is that with the Uzbek government angry, it is not possible to discuss human rights,” said Holly Cartner of Human Rights Watch. “But the point of the sanctions isn’t empty dialogue - it’s to change behaviour - and on that score Tashkent has only gone backwards, including by keeping 13 human rights defenders in custody.”

One Tashkent-based political analyst said the easing of sanctions should be seen not as a reward for past

progress, but rather as an incentive for the Uzbek government to do better from now on.

“It’s a kind of signal that they should correct the situation and think along those lines. Europe is always open to dialogue and if Uzbekistan undertakes actions that meet the requirements, then it can count on something [in return],” he said

Vitaly Ponomarev, a Central Asia expert with the Russian human rights group Memorial, does not believe the EU decision was backed by such lofty motives. Instead, he argues that Europe’s hunger for Central Asian energy is taking precedence over human rights.

“This is an attempt by some EU members to use the softening of sanctions to expand their geopolitical presence,” he told IWPR. “So one can hardly expect to see any positive effect in terms of an improvement in the human rights situation.”

The EU approved a new strategy for Central Asia in June. Developed under Germany's presidency, it aims to build the EU’s political presence and influence in the region and seek access to energy resources.

Uzbekistan is a major natural gas producer, with the bulk of its exports going to Russia, Europe’s major supplier.

Following the EU meeting, European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner confirmed that the sanctions were eased in the context of the new approach to Central Asia.

“I think we have to at least try... it's the most populous country [in the region], it is a country in our Central Asian strategy; I don't think we should just leave it out. I think we should engage with them and clearly try to work step by step in order to improve the situation of human rights,” she said, in remarks quoted by RFE/RL.

Germany has used its EU presidency to lobby for sanctions to be lifted altogether, although it was opposed by some other member governments. The official German view of sanctions was apparent right from the start, when it allowed Almatov to visit the country for medical treatment in November 2005.

Some analysts say EU sanctions have had no impact on the Uzbek government, other than to provoke it into restricting the activities of international organisations and foreign media while continuing to repress dissidents.

Akylbek Saliev, the director of the Bishkek-based Central Asian Institute for Strategic Analysis and Prognosis said the visa ban and arms embargo “looked ridiculous” and “had no real impact on the authorities or the population”.

This was because Uzbekistan sources most of its weapons in Russia, not Europe, while the officials denied entry from Europe were not relevant to economic deal-making, he said.

In Uzbekistan, a new round of mass arrests began last month, in what is being portrayed as a counter-

terrorism sweep. Local observers say many of the charges are patently fabricated.

“Karimov’s government does not regard human rights as a priority. The persecution and oppression continue,” said an Uzbek journalist who asked to remain anonymous. “I harboured this last hope that EU sanctions would make the authorities responsive on this issue. I’m very unhappy about the lifting of sanctions,”

On the streets of Tashkent, many people appeared unaware of news that the sanctions had been relaxed - the heavily-censored media meant they had simply not heard about it.

One local man who did know about the sanctions said the decision to lift most of them would not prompt the government to change its ways.

“Removing barriers is no incentive,” he said. “If there is no barrier, then no Uzbek official will have any fear, and they will be to conduct actions similar to the one in Andijan again. That’s what we are afraid of.”

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