

Tashkent Braced for War

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The Uzbek leadership looks set to help the US in its war against Bin Laden and his Taleban allies.

Tashkent leaders have reacted coolly to a Taleban threat to mount a jihad, or holy war, against Uzbekistan if it helps the United States attack Afghanistan.

The Uzbek leadership, apparently unfazed by the warnings, seems ready to assist the US, but only on condition that Washington guarantees the country's security.

The Taleban threat was delivered by Afghan defence minister Mullah Obaydollah Akhond at a Peshawar press conference, according to the Afghan Islamic Press, AIP. "Any kind of aggression against Afghanistan will be met with jihad and Uzbekistan will face the consequences," he is reported to have said.

"Uzbekistan should be cautious about being dragged into such issues, the brave people of Afghanistan will fight against its enemies."

A similar threat was made in a letter to Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov. But his spokesman, Bakhodiy Umarov, said there was nothing new in the Taleban declaration of jihad against Uzbekistan.

"They declared war against us a long time ago, when they started supporting and harbouring the leaders and members of the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), who are charged with a number of crimes against Uzbekistan," Umarov said.

So far, official Uzbekistan is keeping quiet about how it will assist America in its anticipated campaign to smash Taleban bases and Osama Bin Laden's network.

According to a reliable source at the defence ministry, at least one US air force transport aircraft has already landed at a military base near Tashkent. The source said the plane was carrying reconnaissance equipment.

The public have been told that Uzbekistan is supporting Washington strictly on condition that its own security is guaranteed. "Any agreements about cooperation with the US will have a price, and this price is security," an official said.

Some here believe Uzbekistan will benefit from US action because America is likely to strike not only against Bin Laden/Taleban camps but also bases of the IMU, as the latter are seen as collaborating with the former.

Indeed, there have been reports that IMU commander Juma Namangani has been appointed leader of a 9,000-strong force uniting IMU fighters, Arab mercenaries and Muslim militants from north-west China.

Tashkent has over the years struggled to defeat the IMU, which has posed a serious threat to the internal stability of the country. The group has vowed to overthrow the current government and establish an

Islamic state in Uzbekistan.

The country's leadership believes the best opportunity it has to deal a decisive blow to the IMU is to support an American military campaign.

"It would be very beneficial for Uzbekistan if the US war on terrorism knocks out (IMU leaders) Takhir Yuldash and Juma Namangani," said Faizulla Iskhakov, professor of history and political science.

Tashkent is also keen to assist the US because it sees a strategic partnership with Washington as a counter-balance to its relations with Russia, which has consistently attempted to keep a reluctant Uzbekistan under its sphere of influence.

Moscow has in recent years played up the threat posed by the IMU as a means of encouraging Uzbekistan to cooperate more closely with it, especially in the military field.

But the prospect of siding with the US in a war against Afghanistan has roused mixed emotions among the Uzbek public. Some share the government's view but others fear America will launch its attacks and then leave them to face a vengeful Taleban.

"I categorically oppose any support for US action even though I condemn terrorism," said bank employee Aziz Abidov. "There is a danger that Americans will carry out their bombing and then abandon us to face a devastated and angry Afghanistan."

The first few days of fighting will determine the extent to which Washington will rely on its Central Asian ally. But Iskhakov believes it won't be possible to make an accurate assessment of the US operation's effectiveness for several weeks. "If during the first month, the US and its allies do not defeat Taleban and the international terrorists hiding in Afghanistan, then a difficult guerrilla war will start in the mountains. This could last a long time," he said.

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