

Uzbek Police Beat Peaceful Demonstrators

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United States embassy regrets use of force against protesters calling for return of farm seized by local authorities.

A small demonstration outside the United States embassy in the Uzbek capital Tashkent has been broken up by security forces wielding truncheons.

The protest by about 70 people – largely women, some with children – began on the morning of May 3, but it was not until late in the evening that security forces moved in.

The demonstrators had come from the southwestern province of Kashkadarya to press their central demand that the authorities should return a farm to a family called the Choriev. Family members, who were among the protesters, say the farm was wrongly seized by the local government.

The group set up tents on the pavement outside the embassy compound and said they would remain there until their demands were met. They chose the venue because they said they would seek asylum in the US if their own government refused to respond.

Placards and banners called on government officials to resign and called for an end to poverty.

Although the protest clearly reflected local concerns rather than opposition politics, and there were so many women and children present, the authorities resorted to tough measures.

Throughout the day, a group of up to 50 young men in plain clothes were standing by in readiness, and fire engines, ambulances, and police vans of the type used to transport detainees arrived one by one.

At 11.20 in the evening, when some of the adults and children were asleep inside the tents, two buses drew up and about 50 people armed with truncheons jumped out. Some were in police uniform and others in camouflage, but most were in plain clothes.

The demonstrators were so intimidated that they put their hands in the air and called out that they would stop their protest action and go home immediately.

Their pleas were ignored and the security forces waded in, beating people apparently indiscriminately.

Internet sites reporting on the incident said protestors suffered broken arms and legs, but at the time this story was published it was impossible to confirm reports of injuries as the protesters had been sent back to Kashkadarya.

Journalists reporting from the scene, some from IWPR and the Prague-based RFE/RL, and a German reporter were also dragged away towards the waiting buses. They were rescued by a Tashkent police officer who prevented physical attacks on them and got them away from the scene.

A spokesman for the Uzbek interior ministry, Vyacheslav Tutin, said the following day that all the participants in the protest had been put on buses and sent back home. The spokesman said 11 men, 13 women and 19 children were detained in all.

Tutin said it was the protesters' own fault if security forces behaved in a heavy-handed way, because earlier in the day, police and National Security Service officers had been stoned by the crowd.

Speaking before the evening police assault, protesters said they had thrown stones that morning, but only when members of the security forces attempted to grab a nine-month-old baby from its mother's arms. They said police retreated after this initial intervention.

The US embassy issued a statement regretting the authorities' use of force against protesters who were exercising rights to freedom of expression and assembly accorded them in United Nations conventions. The statement said the demonstrators did not present any threat to embassy security.

It did appear that the protesters were an unusually vulnerable group. They began their action without providing themselves with food and water. For the first few hours, residents of a nearby apartment block supplied them with tea and water until police ordered them to stop, so by the evening they were in no fit state to go on.

A foreign observer present on the scene said it made no sense to use crude force against such an unthreatening group of people who could easily have been persuaded to end their protest.

"Brute force against a group of women and children and the deployment of resources en masse may, on the one hand, demonstrate the power of the state. On the other hand, it may be a sign of cowardice," said the westerner, who asked not to be named.

Tolib Yakubov of Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan condemned the way the police had acted, and said it seemed inevitable both that the regime would grow ever more repressive and that people would continue protesting against it. "There's no other option - either for them or for us," he said.

The protest and the Choriev family's story that lies behind it appear to be symptomatic of a new kind of grassroots action in Uzbekistan - based on economic concerns, rather than Islamic radicalism or political opposition as in the past.

Last autumn, the government appeared taken aback when market traders complaining of over-intrusive government regulations rioted in towns in the Ferghana valley.

"The authorities took our business, our limited company Kesh," said Bahrom Choriev as the embassy protest was still under way. "We are demanding they return the company to us or give us political asylum in the US."

The Kesh firm, whose shares the family bought in 1999, consisted of an area of farmland, 4,000 head of cattle and 13,000 pigs. The local authorities later moved to take ownership of the property, and the director - the eldest Choriev brother Bahodir - was put in jail for a criminal offence the family says was fabricated.

After his release, Bahodir spent four years fighting through the courts to regain ownership, but he

eventually gave up and last year won political asylum in the United States.

“Our family’s been robbed and we’re all unemployed now,” commented younger brother Bakhtior. “We want to leave this country – there’s no justice here.”

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