

Uzbek Regime Tries to Silence Activists

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Tashkent accused of intimidating democracy activists on eve of major gathering of regional heads of state.

The Uzbek authorities have been intimidating rights campaigners in advance of a major regional summit, in an attempt to deter them from demonstrating during the event, leading activists say.

The authorities are keen to ensure that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, SOC, summit later this week is trouble-free, since it comes as the body - made up of four Central Asian states, Russia and China - seeks to transform itself into an effective counterweight to American engagement in the region, analysts say.

They say Uzbekistan is keen to see the organisation play a bigger role in the region because, although an ally of Washington in its "war on terrorism", it has become wary of United States' criticism of its human rights record.

Fearful of activists embarrassing Uzbekistan during the summit, the regime has warned many of them that they will face imprisonment or other unspecified consequences if they demonstrate during the two-day session - attended by regional heads of the state - which begins on June 17.

Yelena Urlaeva, member of the Society for Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Uzbekistan, said that she has come under constant pressure from law enforcement agencies over the past few weeks.

"Police call me on the phone and warn that it could get worse for me if I demonstrate [during the summit]; that I should think about my son because he might suffer as a result of me - all rights activists are receiving such threats," she said.

Abdumajid Boymatov, a member of Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, HRSU, said he was told to turn up at a local police station, where he was warned that he had better stay at home during the summit, unless he wanted to "seriously complicate his life".

Bahodir Choriev, who recently became the first Uzbek businessman to try to organise a demonstration against President Islam Karimov, said police told him that he might end up behind bars if he tries to protest.

"First they tried to persuade me not discredit my country during the SCO session - or at least not to protest until June 20 - but I refused. Then they switched tactics. The district prosecutor put on the table the entire contents of a criminal case against me and said that he could open it and use it against me at any time," said Choriev, whose plans to protest against Karimov on June 1 were thwarted by the authorities.

Rights activists say they wanted to stage rallies during the SCO summit to draw attention to government crackdowns on religious extremists which officials hold responsible for the recent bomb attacks in Tashkent and the explosions that struck the capital in 1999.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, suspected of the earlier outrage, is widely believed to have been dealt a fatal blow by the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan. Uzbek police say they believe a radical Muslim group was behind the latest violence but have not been more specific.

Urlaeva insists Islamic extremists no longer pose a threat but a combination of the government's abuses and failed economic policies was creating a new generation of radicals, "Violation of rights results in the radicalisation of ordinary peaceful people."

She said she wanted to warn SCO members that Uzbekistan would lecture them on how to "deal" with opponents of their regimes.

The SCO summit is expected to discuss a wide range of issues from regional security to economic cooperation, but there will be a particular focus on the former with the inauguration of the organisation's new anti-terrorist facility in Tashkent.

According to David Lewis, director of the International Crisis Group, ICG, in Central Asia, the summit is an attempt to transform the SCO from a notional alliance of regional states into a thoroughgoing, functioning body.

The move, he says, reflects both Russian and Chinese concern over US engagement in the region and Central Asian weariness of Washington's criticism of their human rights record.

Of the countries in the region, Lewis points out that Uzbekistan has the tensest relationship with America, despite their strategic partnership agreement. He says that ties have been complicated by the former's failure to improve its human rights record. Lewis reckons relations between the two could become even more strained if the Democrats triumph in the US presidential elections, which is why "Uzbekistan is turning to the east".

Location: Central Asia
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