

Uzbek Rights Defenders to Fight on Despite Sanctions End

Author: [News Briefing Central Asia](#)

Despite their disappointment at the European Union's decision to lift the last of its sanctions on Uzbekistan, opposition groups and human rights activists say they will continue urging the international community to press for change in the country.

As EU foreign ministers gathered in Luxemburg on October 27 to discuss the sanctions, Uzbek dissidents staged a protest outside to highlight what they saw as a deterioration in their country's human rights record.

The EU ministers decided to end an arm embargo, the last remaining of a package of sanctions imposed after the Uzbek authorities refused to allow an independent investigation into the May 2005 violence in Andijan, when government troops opened fire on demonstrators, killing and wounding hundreds.

Around the time that the EU sanctions were lifted, several more rights activists were convicted or had their existing sentences extended.

The protesters outside the EU building held up signs drawing attention to the cases of political prisoners in Uzbekistan.

"There are many people incarcerated on fabricated charges, some of them convicted after Andijan," said Nurullo Maksudov, who heads the May 13 Union, set up by people who fled Uzbekistan after the violence. "We will be holding similar protests in the future so that an independent investigative commission comes to Uzbekistan to see the prisons, in particular."

The Russian human rights group Memorial lists 16 individuals as political prisoners in Uzbekistan, while the locally based Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders says around 300 dissidents are in jail.

Human rights defenders say they will continue fighting for justice. The loss of EU sanctions as a leverage mechanism may even strengthen their resolve.

"We are now going to become more active and we'll constantly keep international institutions posted about human rights violations," said Surat Ikramov, who heads the initiative group in Tashkent. "If we engage in stronger actions, the West will be forced into taking some kind of action against the Uzbek authorities. It might not be sanctions, but other methods of pressuring the government."

Umida Niazova, who heads the German-Uzbek Human Rights Forum based in Berlin, says activists will take every opportunity to raise human rights issues when they engage international institutions in dialogue.

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