

Uzbek Terror Suspects' Families Targeted

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The detention of militants' relatives has raised yet more concern over Uzbekistan's dismal human rights record.

The Uzbek authorities are harassing and persecuting the families of Islamic militants, according to human rights organisations.

Uzbek authorities have been cracking down on political dissent and militant activity since suspected members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, carried out a series of bomb attacks in Tashkent last year, killing 16 and injuring over 120.

Following the Tashkent explosions, Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, appeared on state television and said, "fathers would answer for the crimes of their sons." His threat proved far from rhetorical.

During the trials of those accused of organising and perpetrating the bombings, relatives of the defendants reported being detained and interrogated by the police. Some claimed they were beaten and tortured.

Nor were these isolated incidents. Several weeks after the explosions, police arrested the father of Zikir Khasanov, the man accused of leaving a car bomb outside the former KGB building in Tashkent. Khasanov's sister Dilfuza said her elderly father was held for two months in the basement of the Internal Affairs Ministry, before being transferred to hospital. He died there in May.

Dilfuza claims to have known nothing about her brother's activities, as he had left the family home 18 months earlier. Nonetheless, his entire family suffered for his actions. Dilfuza and another sister were held by security forces for several days. Another two brothers were arrested.

Admittedly, Uzbekistan's law enforcement authorities were under enormous pressure to bring suspects to trial in a very short space of time. But this hardly excuses the torture and persecution of suspects' relatives.

Karim Uzakov, an employee of the National Security Service, was found guilty of participating in the terrorist acts. Soon after he was detained, his brother-in-law was summarily fired from his job.

But perhaps the hardest hit family is that of Juma Namangani, the leader of IMU. Namangani is thought to have organised both the Tashkent explosions and a series of brutal murders of security personnel in the city of Namangan in 1997. He is also suspected of having led an armed incursion into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in August last year.

Since the 1997 murders, says Namangani's sister Makhbuba Akhmedova, security forces have paid regular visits to the family home and called relatives in for questioning. "For the last three years we've been visited continually by armed men," she says. "They come every two or three days. Sometimes they come at night, and wake us up by poking us with their machine guns, asking us at gunpoint whether Juma has been to visit."

Since the Tashkent explosions, Makhbuba continues, the visits have become even more frequent, even

though the family publicly disowned Juma in the regional assembly.

Eventually, says Makhbuba, the pressure became so unbearable that she and her brother Nasyr Khodjiev decided in March this year to pay Namangani visit in Tajikistan, where he found refuge in the eastern region of Tavildara. They wanted to talk him into putting down his weapons and repenting in public for his crimes against Uzbekistan.

"We went to him because we wanted to tell him face to face about the suffering he was causing his family," says Makhbuba.

But the pleading proved fruitless. Namangani told his family he would not recant and advised them to stay with him, as they would only continue to be persecuted in Uzbekistan. His brother and sister returned to Uzbekistan where they were both arrested.

At the end of June, the Namangan Oblast Court of Uzbekistan sentenced Nasyr Khodjiev to 14 years imprisonment for travelling to Tavildara. Makhbuba Akhmedova was detained by the militia for five days and continues to be called in for interrogation.

Nasyr's arrest has outraged human rights groups in Uzbekistan, who are already alarmed at the level of state-sanctioned human rights abuses and the muzzling of critical media. Chairman of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights in Uzbekistan, Mikhail Ardzinov, says there are no grounds for the Nasyr's arrest and conviction.

In the centre of Tashkent, under the monument to the great Uzbek hero Amir Temur, is an inscription that reads "Strength in Justice." For Uzbeks unlucky enough to have a militant in the family, it seems the justice Uzbekistan believes in these days involves persecuting the innocent.

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