

Western Powers Must Bear The Blame For Uzbekistan Crisis

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

After President Islam Karimov's American-trained crack troops massacred an estimated 500 people on the streets of Andizhan, the Uzbek leader insisted that the victims were Islamic terrorists. They were not. But the real danger is now that Islamic extremists, rather than democratic forces, will exploit the power vacuum.

Much of the blame for the present crisis rests on the shoulders of the United States, Britain and European powers who since September 2001 have refused to support democracy and instead propped up dictatorships in Central Asia.

Before 2001 the countries of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were a forgotten corner of the world. Their leaders and regimes had barely changed since the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and they had refused to carry out desperately needed reforms.

The US and Europe had little incentive to support democratic change in the region. Instead, the Pentagon established close relations with Uzbekistan in 1998, funding and training Uzbek troops to deal with Islamic extremists.

The CIA and MI6 followed suit, helping to train and re-organise the Uzbek security services which are notorious for torture. After September 2001 the US leased military bases from Mr Karimov while Uzbekistan became one of 10 countries where the CIA has "rendered" dozens of al-Qa'eda suspects in the full knowledge that they would be abused.

US diplomats and some of their British colleagues, such as Craig Murray, the former British ambassador to Tashkent, fought a losing battle with the Pentagon and the intelligence services, urging them to push for reforms.

Instead, more aid was showered on the Uzbek military and secret service. The harsh words the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, used to condemn the Uzbek regime on Sunday were almost exactly the same that Mr Murray, who was forced to resign, used in his reports to the Foreign Office in 2002.

The overthrow of President Askar Akayev in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan last month represented the first break in this systematic repression in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz and the earlier Ukraine revolutions should have been a wake-up call for the West.

However, Mr Karimov was well aware of the implications of these revolutions. Last year he started banning leading Western non-governmental organisations from operating in Uzbekistan, with little public protests from Western governments.

At the end of January 2005 Mr Karimov issued a warning to Western ambassadors in Tashkent that he would use "necessary force" to stamp out any democratic unrest in Uzbekistan. Still there was no significant change of policy in London or Washington.

Mr Karimov's repressive system has ensured that all democratic parties are banned. Unlike in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, where there was an organised democratic opposition, one has had democracy training in Uzbekistan.

As a result there have been many more underground Islamic extremist groups mushrooming in Uzbekistan, becoming organised and in the past taking aid from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Taliban and al-Qa'eda.

The best known group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, was routed in the 2001 war in Afghanistan. But its remnants under Tahir Yuldes, now based in Pakistan, have been able to get back in touch with their supporters in Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, the armed group that first attacked the jail in Andizhan were not extremists but relatives of 23 businessmen and traders on trial for their lives. The 23 were the first to be freed in the jail break and from then on the movement became a local popular uprising.

Meanwhile in Tashkent, Mr Karimov is rumoured to be extremely ill. But Western policies have ensured that even if he were toppled by an internal power struggle, his replacement would only be another dictator.