Five Year Anniversary of Andijan Tragedy:
The International Community Should Insist on Accountability

Brussels/Tashkent 11 May 2010. As the five year anniversary of the Andijan events in Uzbekistan is approaching, the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIDU) and the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) urge the international community to continue to demand accountability for this tragedy.

The tragedy took place on 13 May 2005, when Uzbek law enforcement and security forces forcefully suppressed a rare mass protest in the Uzbek city of Andijan and virtually massacred hundreds of peaceful protesters.

The mass demonstration was related to a trial under way in the city’s regional court, where a total of 23 men were being tried on charges of “religious extremism”. The charges against the men were widely believed to be unfair and the trial was characterized by serious procedural violations. Among others, the men alleged that they had been subjected to abuse in pre-trial detention and were forced to sign “confessions”. Because of the arrest and prosecution of these men, who were successful entrepreneurs, a considerable number of people had also lost their jobs in the region. During the trial, peaceful protests were organized outside of the court building on a daily basis to demand justice and acquittal of the men. As the trial continued to drag out and no end to it was in sight, frustration grew among the protesters.

On 13 May, a gradually growing number of people gathered in the central Babur Square in Andijan to voice grievances about repressive government policies and economic hardships. Their number grew to several thousands. At this time, a rumor also circulated that Uzbek President Karimov would arrive to the city and address the people in the square. Instead Uzbek law enforcement and security forces encircled the crowd and repeatedly fired indiscriminately on the protesters, the vast majority of whom were unarmed. They did not give any warning or attempt to use other crowd control measures, such as water cannons or tear gas, and they ignored cries from protesters to stop shooting. As a result of the shootings, hundreds of people died and an even higher number was injured. Among the victims were many women, children and elderly.

The shootings apparently formed part of a law enforcement operation to capture a group of armed people who in the early hours of 13 May had stormed government buildings, taken officials hostages and initiated a prison break-out, where among others the entrepreneurs on trial were freed. However, even if this was the case, it clearly cannot justify the excessive and disproportionate use of force that took place and that was documented by national and international NGOs, as well as international organizations. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has concluded that there are strong indications to suggest that Uzbek security and military forces committed “grave human rights violations mostly of the right to life” and that it “is not excluded” that the events “amounted to a mass killing”.

According to Uzbek authorities, 187 people died. However, NGOs and international organizations have assessed the figure to be several times higher, with some estimates putting the death toll at over 1000. The Uzbek authorities have to date failed to disclose where citizens who were killed in the shootings are buried. What is more, the authorities continue to deny responsibility for what happened, arguing that police and security forces did not kill anyone and that “religious extremists” are to be blamed for the death of protesters. Following the tragedy, the authorities engaged in systematic efforts to promote their own version of the events and to suppress the spread of independent information about them. State-controlled Uzbek media did not report about the shootings and independent journalists, human rights defenders and others who sought to reveal the true facts about the events faced various forms of harassment. Foreign citizens were prevented from accessing Andijan or were subject to surveillance while being there, while residents of the city were intimidated and warned not to speak to foreigners.
In the months after the events of 13 May, hundreds of people were charged with crimes related to the violence and tried in closed and secret hearings, where they were given lengthy prison sentences. There are serious concerns about the fairness of these proceedings and the treatment of those on trial. Relatives of those convicted have not been informed about the details of the sentences handed down against their loved ones or about the locations where they are serving their sentences. None of the officials who were involved in the shootings have been brought to justice and held accountable.

The Uzbek government has systematically refused to allow an independent international investigation into the Andijan tragedy despite calls by international organizations and foreign governments to this end. Because of this refusal, in late 2005, the EU adopted a number of sanctions against Uzbekistan, including a visa ban on officials considered to be directly responsible for the indiscriminate use of force. However, over the coming years the sanctions were gradually eased and in 2009 they were finally abolished, although the Uzbek authorities continued to obstruct an impartial inquiry. When examining the human rights record of Uzbekistan earlier this year, the UN Human Rights Committee noted with dissatisfaction “the absence of a comprehensive and fully independent investigation on the exact circumstances of the events during which several hundreds of civilians, including women and children, were killed by the military and security services”.

The Andijan tragedy was followed by a further deterioration of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. In the aftermath of these events, the regime of President Islam Karimov stepped up efforts to consolidate its grip on power, suppress opposition and silence those who criticize and challenge official policies. In this campaign, which continues to date, tactics of intimidation, unlawful arrests, trumped-up charges, and imprisonment have been used against journalists, human rights defenders and others who have sought to speak out about injustices and human rights abuses and to hold the government accountable for its actions. In its recent review of Uzbekistan, the UN Human Rights Committee stressed its concern about “the number of representatives of independent NGOs, journalists, and human rights defenders imprisoned, assaulted, harassed or intimidated, because of the exercise of their profession.”

The IGIDU and the IPHR call on the international community not to allow the fifth anniversary of the Andijan events to pass by unnoticed, but to use it as an occasion to:

- Reiterate concerns about the failure of the Uzbek authorities to ensure accountability for the tragedy that took place on 13 May 2005;
- Renew calls for a thorough, independent and impartial international investigation of these events, with a view to identifying, prosecuting and punishing those responsible for the killings;
- Demand measures to provide victims of the Andijan shootings and their relatives with full compensation; and
- Insist that the Uzbek authorities stop persecuting journalists, human rights defenders and others who exercise their freedom of expression and other internationally guaranteed rights to scrutinize and criticize the current state of affairs in the country and to advocate positive change.

The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIDU) is an independent non-governmental organization that defends and promotes human rights in Uzbekistan. It is based in Tashkent and has nine regional branches and 156 members across Uzbekistan.

The International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) is a Brussels-based NGO committed to supporting and empowering local civil society groups that are working to promote human rights in different countries and to advancing the rights of vulnerable groups who are subject to discrimination and abuse.

---

3 Ibid.