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All articles
Africa
Americas
Asia/Pacific
Europe
Middle East
World

Civil society (420) Economy (121) Freedom of speech (488) Justice (803) Minorities (260) Politics (262) Religion (157) Rights (383) Security (621) Social (445) Torture (191) UN (691) Water (4) Women (219) World News (9)

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EU eases Uzbek sanctions despite reporter's jailing

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Coat of arms of Uzbekistan

15 October 08 - **The European Union has eased the sanctions it imposed on Uzbekistan following the violence in Andijan in May 2005, lifting a visa ban on senior officials but prolonging an embargo on arms sales for another year.**

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Inga Sikorskaya/IWPR, Bishkek - Following a meeting of the EU's **General Affairs and External Relations Council** on October 13, a statement was issued saying the EU "welcomes the progress achieved in Uzbekistan in the last year with regard to respect for the rule of law and protection of human rights".

It cited as positive examples the release of human rights activist Mutabar Tajibaeva from jail last year, legislative and judicial reforms, the abolition of the death penalty, and the ratification of conventions against child labour.

It also hailed Tashkent's willingness to discuss issues, for instance in consultations on human rights in June and a seminar on media freedom held in Tashkent on October 2-3. Participants invited by the EU to the latter seminar issued a statement ahead of the sanctions review, explaining why the event could not be viewed as evidence of improvement in the area of free speech.

At the same time, the EU said it remained "seriously concerned about the situation of human rights in some domains in Uzbekistan and urges the authorities to implement their international obligations fully in that regard."

The EU called on the government to release all imprisoned activists, revoke restrictions on non-government groups, cooperate with United Nations special rapporteurs on torture and on freedom of expression, and grant accreditation to a representative of leading rights watchdog Human Rights Watch.

The easing of sanctions came three days after a court in Nukus in the north of Uzbekistan handed down a ten-year sentence against Soljion Abdurahmonov, an independent journalist convicted of selling drugs. Abdurahmonov has denied possessing or using drugs, still less selling them.

Human rights groups have in the past documented numerous cases where criminal charges including drugs offences have been used to discredit and incarcerate critics of the Uzbek government.

"Abdurahmonov's conviction is an affront to human rights and free speech in Uzbekistan," said Igor Vorontsov, Uzbekistan researcher for **Human Rights Watch**. "He often criticised local authorities, including law enforcement. It is clear that he is being punished for his work. Once again, the Uzbek government is showing that it will not tolerate dissent."

The EU imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan in November 2005 after President Islam Karimov refused requests for an independent international inquiry into events in **Andijan** in May 13, in which governmental troops fired into a crowd of demonstrators.

Officials said 189 people were killed, but some human rights groups put the number of dead closer to 800.

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The EU sanctions included an embargo on arms sales to Uzbekistan and a visa ban on senior officials believed to have played a role in ordering the use of force.

After Andijan, Uzbekistan's relations with the West cooled dramatically. As well as refusing to allow an independent inquiry, the government clamped down on human rights activists and closed down the local offices of international media and non-government organisations.

Observers believe that Uzbekistan is now keen to send out a signal that it wants to put the Andijan issue behind it in relations with the international community.

A source close to the government says President Islam Karimov has found it increasingly difficult to deal with the Andijan issue when it comes up at high-level meetings. Aware that he cannot ignore it, Karimov takes the initiative and tries to frame the violence as a crackdown on extremists, the source said.

Tashpulat Yoldashev, a political analyst now living in exile, said, "Karimov is trying to win the trust of Western countries so that relations with them can be restored to the previous level."

Analysts point out to a number of steps the government has made in the past few months such as abolishing the death penalty; drafting an action plan to eliminate child labour – a major problem in the cotton industry in recent years; the creation in June of a research centre to look at ways of making the judicial system more independent; and several improvements to judicial procedure such as introducing the principle of habeas corpus, better defence rules, and some softer penalties.

In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September, Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov presented these initiatives as proof of "consistent steps" to improve the human rights situation.

Some analysts argue that the Uzbek leadership has been driven to seek a rapprochement with the international community because domestic economic conditions are deteriorating.

Yoldashev notes that the dispute over Andijan had a disruptive effect on Uzbekistan's external relationships, and says the economy is now "suffocating" from an absence of foreign investment and a marked decline in exports of minerals, gas and agriculture produce.

The most urgent issue is exporting Uzbek cotton which accounts for the bulk of country's hard currency earnings and places the country in the top three world exporters of this commodity.

Analysts say the growing boycott of Uzbek cotton by leading western retailers and importers, over the issue of child labour, has put a lot of pressure on Tashkent. In September, Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, joined the boycott and asked its suppliers not to use cotton from Uzbekistan.

A coalition representing major US retailers and cotton importers, including Wal-Mart, was set up to look into the issue, and in August it warned the Uzbek government that the practice of using child labour must stop.

According to Yoldashev, cotton is now "piling up at the [collection] terminals".

Nadezhda Ataeva, head of the Paris-based **Human Rights in Central Asia** Association, pointed out, "The problem of cotton is acute for the authorities. Karimov understands that if a general boycott is imposed, the leadership will not be able to feed people and secure a living wage."

A businessman in Uzbekistan who asked to remain anonymous said the authorities had realised the extent to which isolation was constricting economic potential, and noted that the country was currently suffering from high food and fuel prices.

"The price of bread price was raised again on October 6, and there are long queues for cottonseed [cooking] oil in some shops," he said. "Two weeks ago, petrol prices went up. That's a sign of an economy falling apart at the seams – we will not be able to survive in isolation."

Inga Sikorskaya is an IWPR editor in Bishkek.

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