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# The time is ripe to make

By Jim Lobe

*Human rights abuses have focused the international spotlight upon this Central Asian country and those who support the regime*

**T**HIS week's outburst of apparently Islamist-related violence, which has killed more than 40 people in two major cities in Uzbekistan in the past three days, could spur renewed attention to the strategically located Central Asian country's deplorable human rights record.

In a new report whose release coincided with the bloodiest day yet in three days of bombings and gun battles, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) charged that the government of President Islam Karimov had arrested and tortured thousands of non-violent Muslim dissidents who practiced their faith outside state-controlled mosques, and called on Uzbekistan's Western allies, of which the United States is the most important, to apply real pressure on Tashkent to improve its human rights performance.

"The Uzbek government is conducting a merciless campaign against peaceful Muslim dissidents," said Rachel Denber, the acting director of HRW's Europe and Central Asia Division. "The scale and brutality of the operations against independent Muslims makes it clear that these

are part of a concerted and tightly-orchestrated campaign of religious persecution."

Both the 319-page report as well as the violence in Tashkent and Bukhara pose major dilemmas for Washington and other Western donors that have treated the Karimov government as a close ally in the US "war on terrorism."

In the aftermath of the September 11 Al Qaeda attacks on New York and the Pentagon, Karimov provided Washington with access to strategic bases from which US intelligence and military operations were run during and after the US-led effort to oust the Taliban government in neighbouring Afghanistan in late 2001. Hundreds of US troops and intelligence officers are still operating from the Khanabad air base, which also acts as a supply facility for US operations in Afghanistan.

In exchange, President George W Bush publicly denounced the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as an affiliate of Al Qaeda and sharply increased military, security and economic assistance to Karimov's government. Two years ago, Karimov, who also ruled over Uzbekistan when it was still a Soviet republic, was received by Bush himself at the White House, and Tashkent has since become a regular pilgrimage site for senior administration officials, most recently Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, who visited last month.

Washington and other Western countries have long warned Karimov that his failure to respect human rights and implement serious political and economic reforms, and his repression of independent Muslims in particular, could destabilise the country. But he has responded mainly with only token gestures, while insisting that any far-reaching relaxation of his control would likely lead to a

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Reports suggest that the recent homegrown — a reaction to the non-violent Muslim dissidents. T finds itself walking a tightrope human rights record and calls for the Tashkent regime as a strate

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major upsurge of terrorism by the IMU and another, much larger group, the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has called for the replacement of his regime with a Central Asian caliphate, albeit by non-violent means.

As a result, the Bush administration has tried to walk a tightrope with Karimov by, on the one hand, condemning human rights abuses and urging reforms, and on the other

# e a stand on Uzbekistan

by supporting him as a strategic ally in the "war on terrorism."

This balancing act - reminiscent of US alliances with anti-Soviet autocrats during the Cold War - has been on display in just the past week, with the White House expressing its solidarity with Tashkent on Monday by declaring: "These attacks only strengthen our resolve to defeat terrorists wherever they hide and

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strike, working in close cooperation with Uzbekistan and our other partners in the global war on terror," while on Tuesday, the State Department stressed that "more democracy is the best antidote to terror." The government has blamed the violence, which has reportedly included at least two suicide bombings, apparently by women, on the work of "international terror," as well as members of Hizb ut-

Tahrir, the group that, according to the HRW report, has been the principal target of the regime's brutality and repression.

A series of detailed eyewitness reports by a pseudonymous EurasiaNet correspondent with access to radio communications by the state security forces, stressed that the fighting may be the work of a "homegrown insurgency, rather than a strike by international terrorists," with many people in the streets asserting that the attacks were in response to police abuses.

The HRW report also lends credence to the notion, as suggested in its title, "Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan," that the revolt could indeed be homegrown, given the nature and extent of Karimov's repression. It estimates that some 7,000 independent Muslims are currently in prison and subject to torture and other abuses. "Uzbekistan cannot hide behind the global war on terrorism to justify religious repression," said Denber.

Based on five years of research throughout Uzbekistan, including some 200 interviews with victims and their relatives, as well as other witnesses, human rights defenders and government officials, the report notes that independent Muslims are arrested on vague charges of "subversion," "encroachment on the constitutional order," or "anti-state activities," tried "in grossly unfair proceedings," and

routinely sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. Those targeted for arrest include people whom the state deems "too pious," a term that may include those who pray at home or wear a beard. The report details cases of numerous prisoners who were tortured by methods such as beatings, rape, electric shock, asphyxiation, suspension from wrists or ankles, and burning with cigarettes or lit newspapers.

The regime has also used mass public denunciations of the families of independent Muslims in which they are paraded before their neighbours to be denounced as "traitors" or "enemies of the state" in demonstrations that recall the Stalin period. In addition, police are known to arrest and torture family members of alleged "extremists" or "Wahhabis" in order to gain their surrender.

The report noted Western countries, including the US, have conditioned some of Uzbekistan's aid on improvements in the human rights situation. Denber called on them to strongly denounce such abuses and withhold aid pending substantial progress. "It is shameful that the international community has stood by and allowed this [repression] to continue," she said. "If Uzbekistan's allies want the world to believe that they are against the persecution of Muslim dissidents, they are going to have to take some action to show where they stand." —Courtesy AW