

Human Rights
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US ignoring human rights viol

By Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON: Despite US President George Bush's recent vows to pursue a "forward strategy of freedom" in the Muslim world, one of his closest allies there, Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov, seems to be digging in his heels against any meaningful political reform.

His intransigence is embarrassing not only to the Bush administration, which continues to embrace Karimov as a "strategic ally" in Washington's anti-terrorism campaign, but to Western Europe as well.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which held its annual meeting in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent last May, has warned that it would cut its funding to the former Soviet republic unless Karimov met certain "benchmarks" towards human rights and political reform, including taking concrete steps to end rampant torture of prisoners; registering civil society groups; and ensuring greater freedom

for the media and opposition parties.

But seven months later, human rights groups say the EBRD has nothing to show for its coaxing of Tashkent; if anything, the situation has deteriorated.

"It should be clear to everyone by now that quiet diplomacy simply doesn't work in a country like Uzbekistan," said Rachel Denber, the acting director of the Europe and Central Asia division of New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW). "The EBRD would do better speaking out about the alarming lack of progress in human rights, and publicly calling on the Uzbek government to move forward with the necessary reforms."

While both the US and the European Union (EU) had courted Uzbekistan, the most populous of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, during the 1990s, its strategic importance emerged more forcefully after the Sept 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon. US intelligence and military

forces used former Soviet military bases in Uzbekistan to mount their campaign to oust the Taliban government in neighbouring Afghanistan and have maintained a presence in the predominantly Muslim country.

In recognition of Uzbekistan's importance, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld was scheduled to visit Karimov in Tashkent to address growing concern over the recent deployment of Russian fighter-bombers at a base in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan last week when he traveled to Georgia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The visit, which was cancelled at the last moment due to bad weather over Tashkent, highlighted both continuing US interest in Uzbekistan and the growing rivalry in the region between Russia and the US. Both powers now have bases in Kyrgyzstan, and the recent ouster of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in favour of a more pro-Washington leadership appears to have prompted growing

concern in the Kremlin about US objectives in the region.

Karimov also hosted Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman just last month. Veneman praised the country's leadership, describing Uzbekistan as a "strategic ally of the United States" and offering both food aid and assistance in developing Uzbekistan's agricultural sector. She did not speak publicly about the human rights situation in the country.

Karimov, one of a number of former Soviet leaders in the Caucasus and Central Asia who have maintained their hold on the country more than a decade after the Soviet collapse, is also considered one of those who are most opposed to political and democratic reform.

Despite Western pressure, he has outlawed opposition parties, harassed and imprisoned dissidents, and, despite his own promises, has failed to take meaningful steps to stop torture that is routinely used against per-

lations in Uzbekistan

ceived opponents, particularly Muslims who practice their religion outside of state-sponsored mosques. Scores of dissidents have been executed after sham trials.

In a recent speech before the National Endowment of Democracy (NED), in which Bush criticized what he said were decades of Western tolerance for repression practised by Western-allied Muslim governments, the US president omitted any reference to Uzbekistan — an omission that was quickly seized on by critics both in the US and in the Muslim world as evidence that Bush's rhetoric was hollow.

Human rights groups and regional experts have long argued that Karimov's repressive measures continue to radicalize many Uzbeki Muslims, some of whom have been associated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which Bush himself linked to Al Qaeda before the Afghan campaign, and other armed groups. Non-violent groups, such as Hizb-ut-

Tahrir, are reportedly under pressure from their membership to adopt more confrontational tactics.

Karimov, meanwhile, appears determined to resist opening any meaningful political space for the opposition or even for civil society groups, a stance that was reflected just last week when his government blocked the holding of a conference on the death penalty in Tashkent.

The Dec 5 conference, which was sponsored by a group called "Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture," could not be held, according to the authorities who informed participants the day before, because the sponsoring organization had not been properly registered with the government. Co-sponsors included the inter-governmental Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and New York-based Freedom House, which is close to the Bush administration. In fact, the group had submitted an application to the gov-

ernment last January but had not received any reply despite a law that required a decision within two months.

Cancellation of the event drew strong statements from both the HRW and Amnesty International, which noted that government officials had themselves been invited to address the forum.

"This step shows yet again how freedom of expression is curtailed in Uzbekistan," Amnesty said. "It also highlights the authorities' policy to prevent any public discussion of the death penalty in the country."

The HRW noted that the government has a long history of refusing to register independent human rights or other issue-oriented groups, often treating their activities as effectively illegal. Under strong Western pressure, it permitted two human rights groups to register, most recently in March 2003, just before the EBRD meeting.—*Dawn/The InterPress News Service.*