

Crime Boss Linked to Uzbek Ministers

January 16, 2011

The  Moscow Times

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A U.S. diplomatic cable released late last week by WikiLeaks says high-ranking government ministers in Uzbekistan had close ties to a notorious crime boss — accusations that could reawaken concerns over U.S. dealings with the authoritarian Central Asian nation.

The March 2006 communique sent by then-U.S. Ambassador Jon Purnell says the embassy had obtained video footage of lavish parties thrown by relatives of a reputed mafia chief and attended by the wives of several government ministers.

The cable named the crime boss as Salim Abduvaliyev, a man described by Russian crime experts as being a former wrestling champion who consolidated Uzbek organized crime groups in the 1990s and acquired various businesses in former Soviet republics.

"Salim's wife and the wives of the GOU Ministers form a tight circle of friends," wrote Purnell, who left the post in 2007. "GOU" stands for Government of Uzbekistan. Uzbek officials, who rarely comment on controversial matters, could not be reached for immediate comment.

Such accusations of high-level corruption could affect U.S. dealings with Uzbekistan, which acts as an essential transit point for nonmilitary supplies to troops posted in Afghanistan.

The cable describes an engagement bash for Abduvaliyev's son, Sardor, in July 2005, attended only by women, as is tradition. Included among the 20 guests were the wives of Interior Minister Bakhodir Matlyubov, Justice Minister Burtosh Mustafayev, Foreign Minister Elyor Ganiyev and Finance Minister Rustam Azimov, the cable said.

Abduvaliyev, who is referred to in the cable as a "Tashkent mafia chieftain," was not at the party, but an associate of his handed out \$100 bills to guests as they danced, another local custom. Each guest also got a \$1,000 necklace from Abduvaliyev. The party was held at Abduvaliyev's mansion near Tashkent, decorated by a Versace representative flown in especially for the job, the cable said.

Abduvaliyev also threw a grandiose birthday party for his wife, Shahlo, around the same time, attended by the wives of both Ganiyev and other former officials, the cable said. Most guests, also including a foreign-based oligarch and a prominent businessman, gave his wife \$3,000 cash, the cable said.

Abduvaliyev chairs Uzbekistan's wrestling association and provides lavish support to Uzbek athletes. In 2007, he received a government award as "the year's best sports sponsor."

Uzbekistan has been ruled by uncompromising President Islam Karimov since the Soviet collapse in 1991. Graft under him has been allowed to flourish, with Transparency International ranking the country as among the world's most corrupt nations.

The country allows the United States to use its territory as a land route for the transit of noncombat supplies to neighboring Afghanistan for the U.S. and NATO war effort, the last link in the so-called Northern Distribution Network that originates in Eastern Europe and passes through Russia and Kazakhstan and into Afghanistan via Uzbekistan.

That cooperation has helped heal ties after Uzbekistan drew massive international criticism for a violent 2005 crackdown on an uprising in the city of Andijan.

The main regional hub for U.S. supply transit to Afghanistan is the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan's neighbor to the west.

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