

Uzbekistan Accused of Denying Basic Rights

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Uzbekistan has failed to provide its citizens with basic legal rights despite some reforms in recent years, an international human rights group said Tuesday.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a report that torture remains pervasive in the nation and that independent legal professionals and rights activists have been hindered in their work.

The United States, which relies on Uzbekistan as a major supply route for its troops in neighboring Afghanistan, has applied some pressure over rights issues, but activists say little has been done.

"Driven by a short-term interest in Uzbekistan's strategic importance ... the U.S. and [European Union] have failed to respond to Uzbekistan's deepening human rights crisis," HRW said in its report.

Uzbekistan has sought to respond to Western concerns about its rights record as it attempts

to end the isolation that followed its brutal suppression of an uprising in the city of Andijan in 2005. The Uzbek authorities said 187 people were killed and had blamed Islamists for stoking the violence. But witnesses and rights groups said government troops killed hundreds.

Some of the legal reforms put in place by Uzbekistan included the introduction of the right of judicial review of pretrial detention and the broadening of defendant's access to legal counsel.

The report said the government has failed to put those reforms into action and has used them to claim that it was gradually liberalizing its criminal justice system.

"In several important respects, the situation has deteriorated," the rights group said. "The government has moved to dismantle the independent legal profession and has closed off the country to independent monitoring and human rights work."

A particularly damaging move cited by HRW was the adoption of a law in 2009 abolishing independent bar associations that in effect led to disqualification of many independent lawyers.

"The law has seriously weakened the criminal defense bar, silencing outspoken advocates who had taken on politically sensitive cases and were willing to raise allegations of torture in court," the report said.

The Uzbek Foreign Ministry's press service said it was unable to make any immediate comment on the report.

Domestic and international rights organizations routinely report on the arbitrary detention of activists and the torture of detainees in custody.

"Methods commonly used include beatings with rubber truncheons, plastic bottles filled with water, and electric shock, hanging by wrists and ankles, rape and sexual humiliation, asphyxiation with plastic bags and gas masks, threats of physical harm to relatives, and denial of food or water," HRW said.

HRW called on the United States to withhold military assistance from Uzbekistan until it could demonstrate that it has taken steps to address human rights abuses.

Such punitive measures are unlikely, however, as NATO has come to rely increasingly on Uzbekistan in the transportation of cargo to Afghanistan while relations between United States and Pakistan remain frosty.

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