

**Andijan Massacre Commemoration**  
**Statement of Senator John McCain**  
**May 13, 2009**

Thank you, Tom, for that kind introduction. I'd like to express thanks to you and Human Rights Watch, and to Freedom House, for hosting this important commemoration. The work that you and other human rights organizations do is vitally important – even if lobbying our Senate offices costs you the occasional job with the Administration.

Four years have passed since the Government of Uzbekistan's brutal crackdown in the city of Andijan. On May 13, 2005, President Islam Karimov's security services fired on demonstrators after protestors stormed a prison and local government headquarters. The government has contended that less than 200 people were killed, all of them armed Islamic militants. Yet eyewitnesses, journalists, and independent groups told a much darker story. They estimated the dead at somewhere between 500 and 1000, and said that the vast majority were unarmed men, women, and children protesting the government's corruption, lack of opportunity, and continued oppression. In addition to those killed, many others were wounded, and at least five hundred fled across the border into Kyrgyzstan.

In the wake of the massacre, I traveled to Tashkent with Senators Lindsey Graham and John Sununu. During our brief stop in that country, we saw photos and heard other evidence that was as compelling as it was shocking, and it was clear that the government's account of the events in Andijan simply did not add up. It was also apparent that the killings were just the most dramatic and violent example of government repression in Uzbekistan, part of a larger pattern of human rights abuses.

For years now, repression has been the norm in Uzbekistan, and again this year Freedom House named the country to its "Worst of the Worst" list of the globe's most repressive societies, alongside such human rights abusers as North Korea, Burma, and Equatorial Guinea. Independent media is tightly controlled, reporters have been jailed or have fled the country, and no Western journalists are currently permitted to operate in Uzbekistan. Religious freedom is severely circumscribed, and, often in the name of battling Islamist terrorism, the government has rounded up and imprisoned those opposed to its rule.

As we commemorate the fourth anniversary of the massacre, its legacy continues to sear Uzbek society. To this day, there has been no international, independent inquiry that would determine the facts surrounding the killings. Several hundred individuals convicted in the aftermath of the massacre are reported to remain in prison. The government has not held anyone accountable for the killings, and instead continues to pressure those who fled the attack and later returned to Andijan. “As a result,” Human Rights Watch said last December, “government persecution continues to generate new refugees from Andijan.”

Following the events in Andijan, there was a good deal of discussion about the “dilemma” that Uzbekistan supposedly posed to U.S. policymakers. The government there had provided genuine assistance to us in the war on terror, and was particularly helpful in our operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan. But by May 2005, it had become clear that the regime was part of the problem, not the solution. Its persecution of political dissent and suppression of religious freedom was fostering Islamic extremism, not blunting it. Its human rights record put at stake the credibility of the United States in Central Asia. And its brutal authoritarianism threatened stability, rather than ensuring it.

And so I argued that the question had become not whether to maintain our military relationship with Uzbekistan, but rather how far to scale it back, and how quickly. In the end, Uzbekistan answered this question for us. It expelled U.S. forces from the Karshi-Khanabad military base in southern Uzbekistan and unilaterally abrogated our 2002 agreement on counter-terrorism cooperation.

Now, four years later, a similar discussion has begun. Tashkent has agreed to allow the transit of supplies through Uzbekistan in support of coalition troops in Afghanistan, and there is talk of persuading President Karimov to allow greater coalition access to Uzbekistan as a supply route – particularly after the loss of Manas airfield in Kyrgyzstan. While I believe that our operations in Afghanistan are of supreme importance, and I share the concerns of our military over the viability of supply lines into Afghanistan, I also believe that we must proceed with caution. We cannot allow ourselves simply to become dependent on the goodwill of President Karimov, nor can we fall silent in the face of such human rights abuses as we have seen in Uzbekistan.

On the contrary, the United States has a critical role to play, in Uzbekistan and throughout the world, as the chief voice for the rights and integrity of all persons. It is a role that we suppress at the world's peril, and our own. Identifying with and supporting the struggle of other people to claim their human rights have never been a dividing point between the right and the left in this country. We have argued amongst ourselves over what extent we have a moral obligation to risk blood and treasure and other interests to support the cause of human freedom where it is threatened. That argument has been cast as one between realists and idealists, but you would find Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals on both sides of the debate.

Lately, however, I see a disturbing tendency on both the left and the right – but particularly by many on the left, and in part, I suppose, as a reaction to the war in Iraq and other policies of the Bush Administration they opposed – to disdain making human rights a strong focus of American foreign policy. I think that's regrettable. After all, a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, gave his name to the strain of American political thought that believed most strongly that, as our values are universal, the United States has an obligation to advocate their global ascendance and to help build international structures to protect them.

Our foreign policy should not exclude a strong public defense of the rights of oppressed people. President Obama is surely right to say that, first and foremost, the United States has an obligation to set a moral example to the world, and that we failed in that duty when we used torture to interrogate captured terrorists. That moral failure has made it harder for us to encourage other nations to respect the dignity of their citizens or to rally world support for their cause of the oppressed. But it has not relieved us of the responsibility, nor of the knowledge that we stand for something in this world greater than self-interest.

That is why I hope that all who believe in the cause of human rights, whether in Uzbekistan or anywhere else around the globe, will stand up firmly for this cause, one that accords so deeply with the American character. I encourage the President and the senior members of his administration to be mindful that when your focus on improving relations with other countries, particularly those with regimes that cruelly oppress their people, excludes public identification with the oppressed and advocacy of their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it is very

disheartening, to say the least, to people in those countries who have the moral and physical courage to oppose the tyranny that oppresses them.

On this, the fourth anniversary of this terrible massacre, we have the opportunity to renew our resolve. As it retreats in history and in memory, the events in Andijan may appear to some as the foreign problems of a small and far away country. Yet history is often made in small and faraway places, and four years ago history was made in Uzbekistan. Let us ensure that we are on the right side of it as we turn to the next chapter.