

Fate of Uzbek Refugees Worries Rights Groups

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Human Rights Watch and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees voiced concern this week over the fate of four refugees who fled violence in **Uzbekistan** last summer.

The four men were granted refugee status by the United Nations after they fled **Uzbekistan** for Kyrgyzstan in May following an uprising in the Uzbek city of **Andijon**. Witnesses said hundreds of people fled the city after government troops ended the uprising by shooting hundreds of unarmed protesters.

Uzbekistan is seeking the extradition of the four men, whom it accuses of killing a regional prosecutor during the violence. Under pressure from Uzbekistan to honor its request, Kyrgyzstan's Committee of Migration and Employment, which is responsible for refugees, has asked Kyrgyz courts to invalidate their refugee status and approve extradition, said lawyers for the men, identified as Yakub Tashbayev, Rasul Pirmatov, Jakhongir Maksudov, and Odiljan Rakhimov.

The decision by the United Nations agency to consider the men refugees "was made after a thorough review of all the circumstances surrounding their cases," including the criminal charges against them, according to a news release issued by the agency on Monday.

Human Rights Watch issued a statement about the case on Thursday. "The Uzbek government's promises not to torture these men are not worth the paper they're written on," Holly Cartner, the group's Europe and Central Asia director, was quoted as saying.

Human Rights Watch says that Kyrgyzstan is bound by both the 1951 United Nations refugee convention and other treaties against torture not to return the men to Uzbekistan.

Under a 1993 multilateral agreement known as the Minsk Convention, however, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other former Soviet republics are obligated to provide legal assistance and extradition to other signatory countries.

The 4 men were among about 500 refugees who fled to southern Kyrgyzstan in May. Uzbek authorities have resisted European and American calls for an international inquiry into the violence. They blame terrorists and say 187 people were killed. Human rights organizations say the number of dead was much higher.

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