

**Uzbekistan: Kerry Should Raise Rights Abuses at Talks**  
**By Human Rights Watch**  
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(Washington, DC) – US Secretary of State John Kerry should publicly express concern about Uzbekistan’s deteriorating human rights situation during his meeting with the Uzbek foreign minister on March 12, 2013, and press for concrete improvements, Human Rights Watch said today.

Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov and other high-level Uzbek officials will visit Washington, DC, from March 11 to March 13, at a time of deepening US military engagement with Uzbekistan over its role in the war in Afghanistan.

“Uzbekistan wants a deal from the United States – ignore human rights abuses in exchange for transit rights for US troops leaving Afghanistan – and John Kerry shouldn’t bite,” said Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The US should know by now it has little to gain by a close association with a government that routinely abuses the fundamental rights of its own citizens, and unnecessary, since the Uzbek government needs the US as much as the US needs it.”

The visit comes as the US, along with key European Union member states such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, are deepening their military engagement with Uzbekistan over the need to move equipment and supplies as the Western military engagement in Afghanistan winds down.

Since 2009, Uzbekistan has played a growing role in US efforts to secure supply routes to Afghanistan, chiefly through Uzbekistan’s involvement in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) – a set of commercial agreements with Central Asian states to allow the transit of non-lethal cargo to supply US forces in Afghanistan. The network is an alternative to what administration officials have said are increasingly unstable supply lines through Pakistan, and will be increasingly needed as Western troops depart Afghanistan. The United States and other NATO member states pay transit fees and have entered into contracts that are lucrative for local companies in Uzbekistan, as well as for the Uzbek government.

On February 27, testifying at a hearing before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, a US State Department official confirmed that the Obama administration notified Congress in January of its intent to provide additional military assistance to the Uzbek government.

The assistance will consist of hand-held “Raven” unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for use by Uzbek border guards. In 2012, the US provided other “non-lethal” items, including body armor and other protective equipment, night vision goggles, and thermal imaging sensors for border patrol forces. Congressional and media sources have reported that Uzbek officials are also asking to buy “Apache” attack helicopters from the Pentagon.

Beginning in 2004, Congress restricted assistance to Uzbekistan based on its deplorable rights record, including systematic torture and the imprisonment of peaceful activists. Congress tightened those restrictions following the Andijan massacre of May 2005, when Uzbek government forces shot and killed hundreds of mainly peaceful protesters in the eastern city of Andijan.

However, in January 2012, the Obama administration exercised authority that Congress granted it to waive rights-related sanctions and to re-start military aid to Tashkent. The deeply troubling move was made even though Uzbekistan had made no meaningful human rights improvements, Human Rights Watch said.

The British Ministry of Defence also announced in February that it had reached a deal with Tashkent to “gift” certain leftover military equipment from the war in Afghanistan as part of its military withdrawal.

Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-California) stated in the February 27 hearing that during his recent visit to Tashkent, Uzbek officials asked to buy American weaponry to replace the Uzbek military’s mostly Soviet-era arsenal. In January, The New York Times reported that Uzbek officials have also asked US officials for armored utility trucks, known as mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles.

“Washington and London may have to deal with the Uzbek government on Afghanistan, but the issue is how they do it,” Swerdlow said. “President Islam Karimov, who craves Western recognition and legitimacy, relies heavily on NATO’s military presence in Afghanistan, and his government reaps enormous sums in transit fees. The US and UK should be driving a harder bargain on human rights – not just equipping a government known for repression before it makes even the slightest steps toward reform.”

Uzbekistan’s human rights record remains atrocious, with no meaningful improvements in 2012, Human Rights Watch said. In the last year, Uzbek authorities intensified their crackdown on civil society, placing human rights activists under house arrest and incommunicado detention for peaceful civic activism, extending the prison sentences of peaceful opposition figures without due process, and deporting international journalists who attempt to visit the country.

According to United Nations bodies and the 2011 report by Human Rights Watch “No One Left to Witness,” torture is endemic to Uzbekistan’s criminal justice system. Over a dozen rights defenders, and numerous independent journalists and opposition activists, are in prison in retaliation for their work or criticism of the government.

The country uses government-sponsored forced labor of adults and children during the cotton harvest. Authorities still deny justice for the Andijan massacre, rebuffing calls for an independent investigation into the deaths of several hundred protesters, most of them unarmed. The Uzbek government also defies longstanding requests by 11 United Nations human rights experts to visit the country.

“Lethal or not, providing military equipment to a government engaged in severe, ongoing abuses sends a terrible message that torture, forced labor, and repression are cost-free,” Swerdlow said. “Kerry should make clear when he sits down with Uzbekistan’s foreign minister on March 12 that the status quo won’t do.”

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