

Uzbekistan: A Laboratory for Torture, 10 November 03

Vienna Conference on Torture claims Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have the worst record.

Source: *Muslim Uzbekistan*

Diplomats and human-rights activists urged the United States and several former Soviet republics Friday to adopt laws banning courts from considering evidence obtained through torture.

Faced with what participants described as a growing tolerance for such methods following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Europe's top security body organized a conference to consider how to stop governments from torturing their people.

"Torture is not going to stop until law-enforcement agencies understand . . . that convictions won't happen on the basis of coerced testimony," said Rachel Denber, acting head of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch.

Many participants at the session suggested that the attacks were being used as a pretext for cracking down on political opponents - often dubbed "terrorists" by their states.

Activists often cited former Soviet republics in Central Asia - primarily Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - as being the worst offenders. Russia was also criticized for its actions in Chechnya.

The report for the OSCE by a leading human rights group, the International Helsinki Federation, says torture remains systematic in several countries, including Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Russia.

It said torture is widely used in detention facilities in Uzbekistan, where at least 10 torture related deaths were recorded between late 2001 and 2003.

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Muzafar Avazov, a 35-year old father of four, showed signs of burns on the legs, buttocks, lower back and arms. Sixty to seventy percent of the body was burnt, according to official sources. Doctors who saw the body reported that such burns could only have been caused by immersing Avazov in boiling water. Those who saw the body also reported that there was a large, bloody wound on the back of the head, heavy bruising on the forehead and side of the neck, and that his hands had no fingernails.

The United States, which is backing Central Asian dictatorial regimes, also was singled out because of concerns about the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody at the Guantanamo Bay prison and at several places in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, Denber complained of a lack of access for human-rights watchdogs such as the International Red Cross.

"So there is no way to monitor how people are being treated," he said.

The conference was organized by the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe - which has 55 members from Europe, Central Asia and North America. More than 200 representatives of OSCE participating States and non-governmental organizations attended the meeting.

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