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# UZBEKISTAN: a background information sheet

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## Some basic facts

**Population:** 26,851,195 (July 2005 estimate.)

**Size and location:** Uzbekistan is bigger than the UK, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria combined. It borders Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

**Religions:** Muslim 88% (mostly Sunnis), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%.

**Raw materials:** Natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead and zinc, tungsten, molybdenum.

Uzbekistan has the world's fourth largest proven reserves of gold and tenth largest reserves of copper. The annual gold output is about 70 tons. Uzbekistan is now the world's second-largest cotton exporter, a large producer of gold and oil, and a regionally significant producer of chemicals and machinery.

Uzbekistan currently possesses about 600 million barrels of proven oil reserves, but this is soon expected to increase. There are 171 oil and gas fields and the Uzbek government is offering production sharing agreements (PSAs) in over 80 of the oil fields (estimated to contain about 1.2 billion barrels of oil), which is expected to attract \$400 million in investment.

## Strategic significance

On his tour of the region in April 2004, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated that America regards Central Asia as *"a linchpin in global peace and prosperity. And so stability in the area is of paramount importance and vital national interest"* to the United States.

In June 2004 Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Lorne Cramer, stated that

*"The primary strategic goal of the United States in Central Asia is to see the development of independent, democratic, and stable states,*

*committed to the kind of political and economic reform that is essential to modern societies...the*

*development of Central Asia's economic potential, including its extensive natural resources, requires free market economy reforms and foreign direct investment.*

*This is the only way to improve the well-being of the region's people, diversify world energy sources, and facilitate the movement of these countries into the world economy."*

## Control of energy resources

The central reason for wanting to dominate this area is control of energy resources. The US runs an air base at Khanabad, and keeps 1,000 ground troops there.

Khanabad is part of the ring of air force bases, or "lily pads" as defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld calls them, which are used to project US authority over the surrounding countries and keep a close watch on the oil and gas supply lines running through the Caucasus and old Soviet central Asian republics.

The most important of these is the Baku to Ceyhan pipeline, which runs from Azerbaijan through Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia on to the Black Sea port of Ceyhan.

## US ally in Central Asia

Uzbekistan is America's most important ally in Central Asia. The US and its Asian partners, including India and (according to Jane's Intelligence Digest) Uzbekistan, have discussed a possible Asian NATO.

This "Asian NATO" would be built upon the new U.S. strategy of moving from Cold War style large permanent bases (a feature of Western Europe) to "operating sites." These smaller bases would provide access and support for mobile forces to deal with situations as they occur, without tying down large numbers of troops.

From the point of view of the US, Uzbekistan has a number of advantages. It possesses the largest population and army in Central Asia, shares no borders with China or Russia, has a direct border with Afghanistan, is self-sufficient in energy, and has rich mineral reserves.

Uzbekistan features other developmental assets like a growing population, high levels of literacy, a relatively well-educated elite, and a well-developed communications infrastructure.

# Uzbekistan & Britain

Britain plays its now traditional role as the junior partner of the US. According to the Uzbek governments website:

*“All round development of relations with the UK is one of the important directions of Uzbekistan’s foreign policies. The UK leadership pays great attention to broadening all round cooperation with Uzbekistan....*

*At the regular March meeting of the Uzbek-British council on trade and industry, at a seminar "Doing business in Uzbekistan" many possibilities for developing cooperation in economics, trade and investment were revealed. ....*

*Cooperation in foreign politics and defence institutions and organs of security are broadening. Uzbekistan received a delegation of UK security organs this year.”*

## Trade Links

Trade links are certainly strengthening, with trade between Uzbekistan and the UK valued at £205 million in 2004, an increase of 30% over the previous year.

One of the major oil contracts was awarded in 2001 to UzPEC, a subsidiary of Trinity Energy of the U.K., to explore and develop fields in Southwest Gissar and Central Ustyurt which are expected to produce oil and gas condensate.

Under the agreement, UzPEC is expected to invest over \$400 million over a 40-year period with \$200 million of it coming in the first five years.

## Security Links

Security links are also strengthening. The most important aspect is UK training of Uzbek troops with the aim (according to the UK embassy’s website) of introducing Uzbek officers *“to military staff procedures in use in the UK and NATO, thereby facilitating the ability of the Uzbek Armed Forces to contribute forces to international operations, should the Uzbek Government decide to do so in the future.”*

In June 2005 ‘The Scotsman’ reported that in autumn 2004, 150 officers and men of the Royal Regiment of Wales travelled to Uzbekistan to take part in a major army training operation that apparently included combat operations.

The British troops were veterans of the Iraq war, and were said to have ‘shared tactics’ with Uzbek troops.

In June 2005 ‘The Guardian’ reported that British produced Land Rovers *“were used by troops in Andijan on the day Uzbek forces massacred up to 500 men, women and children last month.”*

This is despite assurances from the British government that export licenses forbade their use against civilians.

## Human Rights

Amnesty International in its report for 2004 summarised the situation in Uzbekistan at the time:

*“Hundreds of men and women, said to be either devout Muslims or their relatives, were arbitrarily detained following a series of explosions and attacks on police checkpoints in March and April and three suicide bombings in July.*

*Scores of men and dozens of women, all accused of ‘terrorism’ related offences, were sentenced after unfair trials to long prison terms for their alleged participation in the violence.*

*Evidence reportedly obtained under torture was routinely admitted in court and there was no presumption of innocence. Death sentences and secret executions continued on a large scale.”*

## Uzbek forces massacre

It is against this background that the massacres in May 2005 must be seen. The May 13 events began when protesters seized arms from a military depot and attacked a local prison, freeing the inmates, including some who had been jailed on charges related to radical Islamic activity.

After battling local police during the early morning hours, militants took control of local government offices. At least nine people were killed and 34 wounded during the initial burst of fighting.

Meanwhile, unarmed protesters gathered in the central square outside the regional administration building. Many of the protesters called on Karimov to resign, voicing complaints with the government’s economic and political policies.

Then, shortly after 5 pm, government troops, backed by armoured personnel carriers, moved in, prompting more gunfire that led to hundreds of casualties among the protesters.

Protests and repression spread over the next few days, and estimates of the eventual death toll vary between several hundred and several thousand.