

## Uzbek Refugees Fear for the Relatives They Left Behind

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Home is hundreds of miles away, but the Uzbek refugees living in a United Nations camp on the edge of town here still fear their government's reach.

The 439 refugees are the largest group of survivors of what human rights groups say was a massacre at the hands of Uzbek security forces, who in May acted to put down an armed uprising in the city of Andijon, killing hundreds of people.

That day haunts the refugees, who say the government has kept harassing them, long after they fled the country. Many of the refugees lost family members who were gunned down; others left relatives behind in their haste to get away.

And since then, refugees say, the Uzbek government has threatened and intimidated their relatives at home, trying to get them to persuade their family members to return to Uzbekistan. The refugees fear that the government wants them repatriated so it can quash all evidence of the killings.

Fleeing to Kyrgyzstan after the May 13 uprising, the group was initially housed in camps there. But after harassment by Uzbek security agents, together with the possible threat of deportation to Uzbekistan for the refugees, United Nations officials arranged for them to be flown to Romania on July 28, to this refugee camp housed in a former border police barracks.

Speaking from the safety of the camp here, many refugees described how their relatives had been driven by Uzbek security officers dressed in plain clothes to the temporary camp in the town of Suzak, in Kyrgyzstan. (The refugees spoke freely to a reporter inside the barracks but under the condition set by the United Nations that they could not be identified because of fears for their safety, and possible retribution against their relatives at home.)

While the Uzbek security agents waited outside the camp, the refugees said, the family members tried to persuade those who had fled to return home. Many of the Uzbeks who visited the group in Kyrgyzstan appeared convinced that the refugees were being held against their will, the refugees said.

"They told me that if I stayed here I would lose my motherland," said one man, who described how his mother, brother and brother-in-law arrived at the camp in Suzak to urge him to return with them.

When he refused, his brother and brother-in-law tried to drag him to one of two waiting cars outside the camp, according to his account.

Inside one of the vehicles were two more men. The refugee said his mother told him the men were low-level government officials. As he cried for help, a group of Kyrgyz camp guards eventually intervened and managed to pull him away.

A 29-year-old economist, who said she had been separated from her two children during the protest in Andijon, was visited in the Kyrgyz camp by her parents, her brother and her older child, a 3-year-old girl.

"I was told that if I came back, they said would they would release my husband," she said, explaining that he had been detained after the demonstrations. She said she had refused to go.

"I tried to take my child first," she said. The girl was being held by her grandmother. But the grandmother refused to hand the girl over.

"She grabbed me with her other arm, and my brother tried to drag me, but I ran way," the economist said. "I didn't even look at my own child."

Astrid Van Genderen Stort, a spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, said the Kyrgyz authorities were very worried about the situation.

"There was fear that Uzbek security was close in the country, or had infiltrated the camp. We were not sure we could rely on the protection of the Kyrgyz," Ms. Stort said in a telephone interview from Geneva.

According to a report scheduled to be released Tuesday by the group Human Rights Watch, 4,500 survivors of the killings and their relatives still in Uzbekistan have been arrested, and dozens of them interrogated, tortured and forced to sign confessions about their involvement in the uprising.

The report's release will coincide with the start of a trial of at least 15 men in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, who are accused of trying to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state. "The government is trying to silence people who witnessed what happened in May," said Rachel Denber, director of the Europe and Central Asia division of Human Rights Watch, in a telephone interview from New York.

In the Timisoara camp, there is little sign of the kind of Islamic extremism the Uzbek government accuses these refugees of. The center is a hive of activity where visitors can encounter chess matches, teams playing soccer, sewing classes and English lessons.

Some of the ringleaders of a prison uprising that led to the protests in May were followers of an Islamic dissident, Akram Yuldashev, who is imprisoned in Uzbekistan, but they denied they wanted to overthrow the government. Many of those who took part said they stumbled upon the protest and joined in when they heard rumors that President Islam Karimov would address the crowd.

"We thought Karimov would listen to our problems," said the economist.

One man, a 34-year-old cook, said: "I truly believed that one day I would be able to demand my rights. Before, I wanted to do so, but I was scared."

While their immediate future now appears secure, the refugees remain worried about those they have left behind. Of the 439 people in the camp, the group's leaders said not one family had been able to leave Uzbekistan intact, meaning they all had relatives still living there.

Several Western governments have already offered the refugees asylum, including the United States, which United Nations officials said was expected to take from 150 and 250 of them. They are expected to remain in Timisoara for several months while their cases are assessed. The United Nations refugee agency says relatives should be able to seek asylum to join their families.

"Yes, of course I miss them and I'm afraid for them," said a 30-year-old teacher, who has left four daughters at home, including an 18-month-old. "But in reality there is not even a chance to contact them. They are my children, but what else can I do?"